



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2010 Volume III: Creating Lives: An Introduction to Biography

Barack Obama: A Nonfiction Approach to Reading in the "Reel" World through Documentary, Political Images, and Speech

Curriculum Unit 10.03.10, published September 2010
by Stacia D. Parker

Introduction / Overview

The goal of this unit is to teach students how to "read" documentary films, Barack Obama's biography, and graphic images. Each of these sub categorical texts will support students learning how to read nonfiction. Biography will be used as the primary text for engaging students in the lives of others, and as a means to persuade them to reflect on their own lives. Although there are many types of nonfiction such as journals, essays, and journalism, biography, is the only type of nonfiction to give in depth coverage of a subject. Thus, students are able to acquire nonfiction writing skills/strategies, via political image analysis, and extensive reading of nonfiction texts. This approach is designed to shift students' view of nonfiction as dry text with "real" facts. Astonishingly, some English teachers partially share this view because English teacher training has been primarily in teaching fiction and teaching writing in response to reading fiction. To underscore this point, when many teachers and students read biography, their focus is limited to recalling the chronological facts and events from one's life. What a boring approach to the genre of nonfiction, particularly biography. To expand this limited approach, students will primarily learn that biographies and documentaries are rich in discussion topics and writing ideas that can enable them to explore the real world. As students begin to see and feel biographies as a compelling type of nonfiction to be responded to, the more active their wonder will become in learning about someone else's narrative. Furthermore, compelling biographical texts can help students and teachers in a myriad of ways. For example, well -written nonfiction can improve students' civic awareness, strengthen their critical thinking skills, increase students' appreciation for how factual detail informs the truth, and motivate students to carefully consider the artistry of beautifully designed informational texts. Guardedly, I would add that nonfiction texts may even improve students' scores on standardized tests by helping readers become familiar with the types of nonfiction passages that regularly appear on "high stakes" tests.

A stark reality in public education is that students spend an enormous amount of time reading fiction from first through twelfth grades. In fact, in grades one through four, fiction is primarily used to teach students to read. However, in fifth through twelfth grades students are instructed to read to learn. This conversion of reading presumes that students have mastered critical reading skills such as being able to: identify facts, draw inferences and conclusions, form judgments, and support opinions. While some students have mastered these skills along with the phonics of reading, many students have not. Not only have students not mastered these

skills; they have barely learned the basics of reading. Hence, many students arrive in high school with a rudimentary understanding of fiction and a severely limited understanding of nonfiction. Nonfiction is simply characterized by many students as being "true." Many students mistakenly believe that "reality TV" is real and everything true must be "objective." They have not learned the ways in which nonfiction texts such as: documentaries, biographies, images, and even autobiographies can prejudicially construct or reconstruct the truth. So while students are overwhelmed with nonfiction media in and outside of school scant in-depth instruction is given to teaching them to ask critical questions like: how is this text constructed, for what purpose, and from whose point of view?

Another stark reality in public education today is that students spend an enormous amount of time taking "high stakes" standardized test. Surprisingly, I have observed the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) routinely ask students to respond to 50% of nonfiction questions. This presents an inconsistency for teachers in states which prescribe heavily scripted curriculums. English Curriculums usually interweave nonfiction texts into anthologies, canons, and lesson plans. The study of nonfiction is usually limited to a few autobiographies, essays, and letters that are taught throughout the school year. The scarcity of nonfiction learning opportunities in scripted curriculums denies students the chance to master the in-depth analysis, synthesis, and evaluative reading and writing skills universally associated with understanding nonfiction. Hence, if teachers are scarcely teaching nonfiction texts; then students are scarcely learning to read, know, and understand the very material that will demand 95 percent of their attention once they leave secondary education.

Studying biography is the perfect antidote for this malady. Although maligned by some as having no rules; biography is the nonfiction genre most likely to spur students' passion for learning about others and themselves. Passion and wonder are contagious and blend seamlessly into a narrative that makes abstract pivotal moments concrete in one's life. In the process students will eventually understand the essence of nonfiction is to discern the use of fact, inference, judgment, and opinion.

Ultimately, students will keenly discern the differences between reading fiction and nonfiction and develop an efferent approach ¹ when reading nonfiction. Educational theorist Louise Rosenblatt asserts the efferent reading stance pays more attention to the cognitive, the referential, the factual, the analytic, the logical, and the quantitative aspects of meaning. Thus, in teaching students about the three main elements in a documentary: visual, sound, and text tracks and the elements and structure of biography this approach will enable students to engage these nonfiction texts on levels far beyond their entertainment value. In fact, requiring students to read film, text, and speeches shapes their understanding of knowing which strategies and graphic organizers work best (plot diagram or Venn diagram) to write effectively about real people in real situations.

Rationale

If we want students to understand and connect information they find in their research, then we must provide multiple opportunities for students to present, publish, and preserve their findings. Biography is the ideal text for entrance into the nonfiction realm; followed closely by documentary. Together, these literary forms enable adolescents to experience the lives of others who have made a significant difference in the public arena. Surely, students will learn of the private and public lives of unconventional and heroic figures. Conversely,

these texts may take students where they often complain, into the lives of people with whom they have little in common, knowledge about, or interest in. Yet, a powerful documentary or biography teaches students about the troubles, joys, pain, and circumstances outside of their own limited experiences while giving them the opportunity to reflect back on their own lives. Perhaps, by holding up a mirror, students will see a world that looks just like their own yet find something they did not know was there. Until this revelation occurs students are just skimming the factual surface of other people's lives. The study of biography forces one to confront assumptions about nonfiction, while carefully considering what one does not know, before adamantly asserting what one does know. In order to become skilled in reading and understanding biography students need to critically consider the following:

1. What is the biographer's relationship/attitude to the subject?
2. At which points in the text is the biographer present?
3. How does the biographer shape our perspective on the subject?
4. What role do, diction, tone, and voice play in providing deep insights about the biographer for the reader?

The answers to these questions are multilayered and open-ended. To explore these complex relationships requires a deep and intimate knowledge of a subject as well as a few standards for writing biography. Another facet for students to consider is one's purpose for writing a biography, and ultimately to decide what a reader is meant to experience at the end of the story. An example of this is found in *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, where, Hermione Lee asserts that biography raises moral issues and can teach one how to live our life or "open our minds to lives very unlike our own" ² thus providing history and knowledge of self. Students and their lives are potential history makers and can examine their family history against the blueprint of a real person they encounter in reading biographies. This examination can catapult students to say, "wow, I did not know that could really happen!" It is my hope that each student will experience an "aha" moment when they understand that an adolescent Obama struggled with the same issues of wanting respect, being accepted by a peer group, and defining himself as an "individual" as they do. These are universal themes in the life of every adolescent which transcend race, geography, and time. How valuable it would be for adolescent students to read nonfiction texts and film and to experience the lives of others who have made a difference in the public arena. And what could be better than a nonfiction text written and documented for students to learn of the public lives of unconventional and trailblazing characters—both male and female. Students will study and learn from the biographical journey of Barack Obama and his experiences while searching for a racial identity, a community, a faith, and a partner. In viewing Obama biographical documentaries, listening to his speeches, dissecting Obama political images, and reading Obama political biographies and his memoir *Dreams from My Father*, students will gain deep insight into Obama's personal struggles to figure himself out as an adolescent black kid in a world dominated by whites. Obama poignantly expresses this point: "I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere." ³ Obama's search for roots and racial identity would plant the seeds for a journey that began with him reading African-American writers who had the same questions. In high-school Obama independently read Richard Wright's *Native Son*, poems of Langston Hughes, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *The Souls of Black Folks*, the essays of James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*⁴ to see what his great predecessors had to say about the ubiquitous question of race, identity, and an African-American male's place in a racially polarized society. Biography definitely has the ability to cause one to closely examine a life unlike one's own; however, with a caveat: one must know that the life being lived must be shaped into an identity. The quest for identification is still the Holy Grail in the adolescent

African-American community as adolescents assert their manhood, attempt to define their womanhood, and consistently define and redefine their self-worth.

Inextricably linked with the journey for identification is the question of conformity which influences the life of every adolescent in high school. Unfortunately, sometimes students will conform to self-destructive behavior in the belief that they are doing their own thing. This fact is revealed in Philadelphia where a startling landmark study ⁵ revealed that half of all incoming freshmen drop out of high school between their freshman and sophomore year. Of the half that remains, many conform to a culture of no disrespect, no snitching, and no tomorrow; just today. The results have been deadly, both figuratively and literally. Like Obama Philadelphia students frequently engage in journeys for respect, for an absent father, for a community, and ultimately for their role in a large urban school community and city. The results of their perilous journeys often leave them with more questions than answers and causes them to believe that others (present and absent) are responsible for the ills in their life. To challenge this assertion about "others" students will interview a matriarch or patriarch in their extended family to understand how much they have been shaped by their family's past, and present circumstances. Moreover, students will confront their daily subconscious choices that reflect their family values, standards, beliefs, and traditions. The awareness of such choices is critical knowledge for students to have so they can contemplate the consequence of each choice. Students will then write a biographical sketch which illuminates values and practices specific to their family.

Unfortunately, conformity to this code of conduct means not conforming to the universal maxim that *education is a passport to opportunity*. In fact, this type of nonconformity stands in sharp contrast to Dr. King's view that "the world's hope lies with the hope of a secure and livable world, lies with disciplined nonconformists who are dedicated to justice, peace, and brotherhood." ⁶ Apparently, Barack Obama agreed with Dr. King by aspiring to create an exemplary life and not conform to society's rhetoric about African-American males growing up in single- parent families or living exclusively in a black world or white world. Obama, in fact, transformed conformity and became an exemplary nonconformist. Obama longed for racial identity and experienced racism, he lived abroad in impoverished communities but was not poor, and he felt isolated and lonely living in an all-white world yet feeling loved, and pursued a broad range of political and academic interests. These circumstances and his personal attributes make Obama an ideal candidate for intensive study in biography. Additionally, what's critical for students to understand is that each time Obama consciously chose to "not conform" to the status quo he was closer to reconciling all his different "selves" into the person he would ultimately become. Hence, the majority of his choices created a rich legacy that prominently displays his unique philosophies, gifts, and talents. So, the primary objective of this unit is: to have students learn invaluable lessons from Obama's journey, learn from African- American writers who have chronicled similar experiences, and understand that their lives have value in and outside of their families. Ultimately, this unit is designed for students to open their minds and discover, they too, can make a significant difference in the public arena. Hopefully, when students discover what price is paid for conforming to expected commonplace behavior, versus what can be gained by "not conforming" to the bandwagon, they will experience epic pivotal moments and challenge themselves to create change that will fill them with hope and pride.

Students will begin to see themselves as having unfolding life stories, which can be created through positive life choices. Students will no longer believe that things just happen or that their life stories have been predetermined by the neighborhood they are growing up in or the schools they are attending. This realization will reveal that their life has value and they can have lives which contribute greatly to humanity.

Background Information

Students in 10th grade are ecstatic when I start with text- to -self connections as a way of introducing literature. Classrooms come alive when the discussions and readings revolve around their interests. So, I have found that that a first narrative is the genre that can engage students the most. To introduce the topic of biography, I will read from *Voices from the Future*,⁷ a series of interviews of teens by teens, subtitled "our children tell us about violence in America." The text deals with mature issues and I will read sections aloud to the class. Students will then write responses and we will discuss reactions to the material and to the people in the interviews. In groups, students brainstorm what they would like to know and what they would like to tell others about the subject of the interview. Some of the discussion topics will also be supplemented with a video or short piece of nonfiction on the same topic. Students will then compare the video or text depiction to what we read *Voices from the Future* to see how realistic the stories are compared to what they know personally and their knowledge gleaned from reading other student's interviews on a particular subject.

The next component of the unit is to increase student awareness about the structure, stylistic devices and content that pertains to biography. Accordingly, students will read the section of Langston Hughes biography where he travels to Mexico to live with his father. This passage reveals the complex relationship Hughes had with his father and reflects his growth as a writer and as a young man. Students will use this passage as a model to write a detailed description of an impactful incident that occurred between a parent and grandparent or sibling. This description will later be included in the student's family biography. All too often students do not have family artifacts, mementos, or traditional milestone markers that would enable them to tell their stories. Thus, student's family biographies will serve as an artifact that preserves a piece of their family history through photos, text, and sound in digital storytelling format. This process will help them enlarge their thinking about telling someone's story. This expansion is necessary because when students reach 10th grade English, most of them regard writing a sketch or biographical narrative as recycling their middle school "famous person" report and turn in a chronologically predictable narrative.

Oral histories provide an invaluable opportunity for students to examine primary documents, hone interviewing skills, and transcribe the information digitally. Furthermore, students will begin to debate whether small details or large patterns or dramatic actions should be used to present the subjects information to engage their reader. Combining oral and written modalities, I believe, is one of the best ways to incorporate comprehensive language arts skills while giving students an indirect approach to reading and analyzing nonfiction. Not only will my students learn to successfully portray a person whom they admire—by using narrative writing techniques such as vividly detailed descriptions, clear purpose, using appropriate tone—but they will also gather primary data through interviewing, researching family histories, and interpreting verbal and written photographs or other primary sources. In the process, many students will gain strategies for nonfiction reading and vice versa.

While reading and researching information on biographical writing, I found this genre of writing to involve a variety of forms: biography, memoir, biographical narrative, biographical essay, biographical sketch, oral history. For clarity I will use the terms *biographical sketch*, which I see as a shorter, more focused piece that can be done in less time, and *biographical narrative*, which contains more details and requires more development. The *oral history project or essay* is a biographical narrative. Unlike fictional narratives, biographical narratives must deal with factual events, accurate memory, and written documents that must be presented in a logical arrangement to make the writer's voice clear and distinct.

The well-written biographical narrative has the following characteristics

Characterization- the writer maintains a consistent attitude toward the subject.

Supporting Incidents- Incidents are specific rather than generalized occurrences.

Significance – the writer provides readers an understanding of the subject's importance to him/herself.

Tone- the writer establishes a tone that clearly and consistently reveals his/her attitude toward the subject.

Organization – the writer integrates the incidents, descriptions, and significance in a way that best conveys the intent of the essay.

In addition to the **oral history**, where the writer explores both the subject and himself, students will learn that writing biography is not akin to reality TV, YouTube, or social networking sites (Facebook/MySpace) where factual information is shared in real time. Rather they will learn to write biographical sketches of the protagonist and antagonist using contextual information for several required 10th grade reading novels. Writing biographical sketches for fictional characters is a skill that will provide practice in the use of evidence, quotations, and carefully selected facts.

Finally students will research three significant events (think 9/11) which have shaped historical, political, and cultural events in the first decade of the 21st century. The discussion of such events will enable students to include powerful descriptions in the mini biographies they will write about each other as their culminating project. In studying the style of writing the author used to convey to the reader the personality, appearance, actions, and beliefs of each event students will have a model upon which to base their writings. A challenge to the student writer lies in interpreting, examining, and relating the significance of the event to another student's life. Yet, each biographer must strive diligently to make the connection between their subject, their subject's pivotal moments, and certain events that had a lasting impact on their subjects' life.

Historical Background Information – Barack Obama

"There's no question that in the next thirty or forty years, a Negro can also achieve the same position that my brother has as President of the United States," ⁸ Robert F. Kennedy.

What a prophetic statement, which came true 40 years after the assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. One month after formally declaring his candidacy for President, Barack Obama, the junior senator from Illinois arrived in Selma, Alabama, at Brown Chapel, to speak. This was not just a run of the mill campaign speech; it was a speech designed to tell his story to the American people, challenge Hillary Clinton, who held the Democratic lead and the lion's share of the African-American vote, and garner the endorsements of prominent civil rights leaders.

Obama's speech "brought himself into the narrative and as he explained the particularity of his background, insisted on a place in the story: my very existence might not have been possible had it not been for some of the folks here today... I stand on the shoulders of giants." ⁹ In Selma, the message was specifically directed at African-Americans; every speech afterward was enlarged to include people of all races and creeds. This

moment demonstrates that Obama was determined to be an individual with an African-American identity but a politician with a broad vision and purpose. This purpose gave way to his birthright as a descendant of the Joshua generation. Joshua 6:20 reads, "When the trumpets sounded, the people shouted, and at the sound of the trumpet, when the people gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed....and they took the city..."¹⁰ This powerful account of a city being overtaken was written after the conquest of Canaan which took place between 1406 and 1375B.C. for future generations of God's people to give them a record of God's mighty acts. On November 4, 2008, God acted mightily, when Barack Obama became the 44th President of our nation and mighty shouts went out from Chicago, Kenya, Hawaii, and all across the world! God had delivered on his promise and President Obama will deliver on his promise of change; yet President Obama's life wasn't always so full of hope, perseverance or determination.

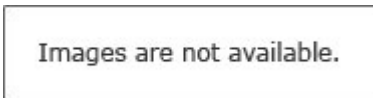
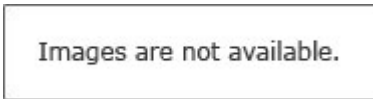
In *Dreams from my Father*, we immediately encounter Obama as a young adult who receives the news that his father has just been killed in West Africa in a car accident. His father had been present only in memory since he had visited Obama just once in the past 20 years of his life. John Amos¹¹ suggests that Obamas identity as a black man is in question as a result of his father's absence. In an attempt to understand his racial heritage Obama chooses to see himself as a black man experiencing global themes: relationships between fathers and sons, the promise of fulfilling the American Dream, struggles associated with coming-of-age, and struggles of the working class. These struggles are understood by all Americans and resonate loudly with young Obama during this period of his life. Interspersed among the universal themes is a dominant theme that Obama cannot change: the impact that fatherlessness has on the construction of male identity. A major factor that can make any level of success unappreciated when questions persist on a personal level that ask Who am I? and Where do I belong? Since Obama, was without a father and had an idealistic mother, no family member was available to help Obama develop an understanding of African-American life, African- American culture, or manhood, &mdash he was left alone to determine all the above while searching for his identity.

Obamas teen years mark the point when he began his search for a racial identity and formed a liaison with a small cohort of African-American males in Hawaii. Obama¹² admits, "I was living out a caricature of black male adolescence, itself a caricature of swaggering American manhood" and from black athletes he learned how to exhibit an "attitude" that was about earning respect, not who your father was. Obama also learned on the basketball court to intimidate an opponent and to never, ever let anyone see you "sweat" which is see you express feelings of vulnerability. Obama transferred those skills to social settings when he confronted anyone who appeared racist or made racist remarks. In Obamas world "white folk" dominated his conversations with his cohort of males and all their past and future transgressions towards blacks. Obama had become what America feared the most: an angry black male. "Our rage at the white world needed no object¹³ ," he calmly states while driving home from a party. Implicit in his behaviors at this time is the belief that his possession of rage is typical of young black males.

Nonetheless, for all of Obamas rage he does not develop or trust the identity he's been searching for. Obama¹⁴ states, "you couldn't even be sure that everything you had assumed to be an expression of your black unfettered self-the humor, the song, the behind-the-back pass-had been freely chosen by you." Subsequently, the only choice was to withdraw and to recognize that "being black meant only the knowledge of your own powerlessness, of your own defeat."¹⁵ " After searching for a father, after searching for a racial identity, after searching for a community a teenage Obama is left feeling the opposite of the empowering experiences he was seeking: powerless. He still must find a way to combat his powerlessness without conforming to the stereotypical image of black male adolescent anger.

Obama had not conformed to the image of a typical black male but he did stray into using drugs which is considered a typical phase in teenage development. Obama ¹⁶ made no such distinction and acknowledges that he was on a slippery slope as he recalls taking drugs, "junkie. pothead. That's where I'd been headed: the final, fatal role of the young would-be black man. Except the highs hadn't been about me trying to prove what a down brother I was...I got high to push questions of who I was out of my mind, something that could flatten out the landscape of my heart...." Recognizing that her son was adrift, Ann Dunham, his mother prodded him about his grades and getting accepted to college. A turning point came when Obama realized to make some sense of his life he would have to leave Hawaii. Obama entered Occidental College in California but graduated from Columbia University in New York. Obama was on his way to finding an identity, a community, a purpose, and great success.

The following political images represent pivotal moments in Obama's political pursuits



Classroom Strategies

SOAPStone

This strategy asks students to analyze the significant elements of a text individually by using the acronym SOAPStone that refers to the Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, and Tone. This strategy can also be used as a prewriting strategy, in which students have to consider their purpose, audience, and tone before they begin writing. This strategy also works with students who don't have much of a background on analyzing documentaries or nonfiction texts. The diagram below poses some questions to guide students through the text.

- Subject** How can you paraphrase the text in a sentence or two?
- Occasion** What are the larger historical issues that inform this piece as well as the immediate need to speak at this time?
- Audience** To who is the piece directed? How do you know?
- Purpose** What is the point or message of this piece?
- Speaker** Who is the speaker? What can you say about the speaker's situation, social class, age, etc.

Tone What is the attitude of the speaker to the subject? What words and phrases reveal this?

Analysis: Choose one or more of the elements above and explain them with supporting examples and/or contrast them with another text or similar subject.

Interactive Student Notebook

Many student notebooks are scantily organized repositories of information filled with uninspired, unconnected, and poorly understood ideas. Interactive Student Notebooks, however, allow students to record information in an engaging way. As students learn new ideas, they use several types of writing and innovative graphic techniques to record and process them. Students use critical-thinking skills to organize information and ponder historical questions, which promotes creative and independent thinking. In Interactive Student Notebooks, key ideas are underlined in color or highlighted; Venn diagrams show relationships; cartoon sketches show people and events; timelines illustrate chronology; indentations and bullets indicate subordination; arrows show cause-and-effect relationships. Students develop graphical thinking skills and are often more motivated to explore and express high-level concepts.

1. Make sure students have appropriate materials.

To create Interactive Student Notebooks, students must bring these materials to class each day:

- an 8 1/2-by-11-inch spiral-bound notebook, with at least 200 pages
- a pen
- a pencil with an eraser
- two felt-tip pens of different colors
- two highlighters of different colors
- a container for all of these (purse, backpack, vinyl packet)

2. Have student's record class notes on the right side of the notebook.

The right side of the notebook—the "input" side—is used for recording class notes, discussion notes, and reading notes. Typically, all "test" information is found here. Literature background information can be organized in the form of traditional outline notes.

However, the right side of the notebook is also an excellent place for the teacher to model how to think graphically by using illustrated outlines, flow charts, annotated slides, T-charts, and other graphic organizers. There are many visual ways to organize information that enhance understanding. The right side of the notebook is where the teacher organizes a common set of information that all students must know.

3. Have student's process information on the left side of the notebook.

The left side—the "output" side—is primarily used for processing new ideas. Students work out an understanding of new material by using illustrations, diagrams, flow charts, poetry, colors, matrices, cartoons, and the like. Students explore their opinions and clarify their values on controversial issues, wonder about

"what if" hypothetical situations, and ask questions about new ideas. And they review what they have learned and preview what they will learn. By doing so, students are encouraged to see how individual lessons fit into the larger context of a unit and to work with and process the information in ways that help them better understand history. The left side of the notebook stresses that writing down lecture notes does not mean students have learned the information. They must actively do something with the information before they internalize it.

Left Side
 Student-Processing
 "Output"



Right Side
 Teacher-Directed
 "Input"

58

11/29

Industrialization Cont...

they have respon. to spend it wisely

B. John D. Rockefeller

1. Knew oil was useless (crude) until refined
2. Started standard oil (chevron)
3. Used Ruthless tactics to beat competition
4. Monopoly: being only one to own business - 90% of American refinery

C. Cornelius Vanderbilt

1. Transportation is key to industrialization
2. Freight sent long distance w/ many stops to load + unload
 • Expensive + time consuming
3. Bought + combined small RR lines

Here is a simple example of the right-side, left-side orientation of the Interactive Student Notebook in action. The student began by taking class notes on late nineteenth-century industrialism on the right side of her notebook and then, for homework, completed a topical net on the corresponding left side using information from her class notes.

Concept sketches

Concept sketches (different from concept maps) are sketches or diagram that are concisely annotated with short statements that describe the processes, concepts, and interrelationships shown in the sketch. Having students generate their own concept sketches is a powerful way for students to process concepts and convey them to others. Concept sketches can be used as preparation for class, as an in-class activity, or as an assessment tool.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One - Who Am I

In this lesson, students will explore the idea of memory in both large- and small-group settings. Students access pivotal moments in their own life experiences and then discuss family stories they have heard. After choosing a family member to interview, students create questions, interview their relative, and write a biographical narrative that describes not only the answers to their questions but their own reactions to these responses. These narratives are peer reviewed and can be published as a class magazine or in a wiki space.

To prepare students for this lesson the teacher and students will read: "Mixing Memory and Desire: A Family Literacy Event" by Mark Faust and "Stories of the Family" by Christine Brems. These essays provide excellent background on the significance of memory that will help them begin their interviews.

Anticipatory Set: Students will write briefly about an event that was memorable to them and why they remember the specific event. In small groups students will discuss their event using the following questions:

1. How have their memories of these events been affected over time?
2. Could they envision discussing these events in ten years? Twenty? Forty?
3. What could someone learn about them as individuals by hearing these stories?

Direct Instruction: Read aloud the first three paragraphs of the Introduction: A life remembered section of Memory and Desire and have students use Cornell Notes to record their reactions to the following questions: Why interview a relative about his past? What was the subject of a family story they have heard in the past? What sense do you have about your parents or grandparents life at your age? What can you learn by interviewing a grandparent or aging relative? What purpose does a family story serve? As a class you want to read a section of Langston Hughes biography and then ask students to define a biographical narrative. Then using a passage from Hughes as a model students will write a biographical sketch of an important memory that occurred in their family. Tell students they will have time to revise their sketches after it has been reviewed by two peer reviewers.

Activity: In groups of 4 have students interview each other about the process of interviewing their relative. Students will record their responses in a K W L graphic organizer or a concept sketch to process the procedures, process, and outcomes of conducting an oral history. Have each group combine their responses and transfer the group response to chart paper. Post each groups charts around the classroom so students can do a gallery walk. While walking students should make note of any unique techniques that were discovered in their discussions.

Assessment: Student's write a bio-poem about the relative that was interviewed

Lesson Two- Make Me A Picture

Students will use Comic Life software to apply their research on biography and President Obama to the graphic novel structure. In synthesizing this information students will develop their writing skills for different audiences through adapting their research to the graphic novel format

Anticipatory Set: Give each student a comic strip and ask them to do a think-pair-share with a partner to

determine what features make a comic different from a novel, and a newspaper. Using chart paper and markers compile a master list of comic book features generated from the students' discussion and leave it posted for future use.

Direct Instruction: Teacher will read aloud Presidential Material: Barack Obama (idwpublishing.com). Students will focus their attention on Obamas thoughts, feelings, and actions. Then student's sketch out the series of significant events that occur in Obamas story, using comic strips as traditional storyboards. By consciously structuring the segments of their biographical narratives in this way, students are encouraged to make connections between events so that their significance to the story is obvious. In class students will generate questions about Obama they would like to have answered, and each student will create a comic strip about Obama as President and a graphic novel Obama as an adolescent. So, it is necessary that students use different sources to create each strip. Explain to students that all graphic novels must include a title page, an introduction with a pivotal moment, seven to ten frames that include images, speech excerpts, and supporting information, a bibliography page.

Activity: Students will practice using levels of questioning strategy to engage with text independently. By teaching students how to write strong and varied questions, all students are able to access any text regardless of their reading level. To introduce this strategy students will be presented with Obamas Speech: A More Perfect Union, they will identify one question at each level, and then solicit more questions from each other, by exchanging notes. The three levels of questioning are as follows:

1. Level 1: Questions of Fact — These are questions that cannot be debated and the answers are found directly in the text.
2. Level 2: Questions of Interpretation — These are debatable questions that can be answered only after analyzing the text closely. The answers are sometimes explicit or implicit.
3. Level 3: Beyond the Text — These questions have their roots in the text, but the answers are found outside the text and are debatable. However, the textual evidence to support the answers is not debatable,

Students should end up with a minimum of five questions under each level of questioning. The questions should be answered in student's comic strips and graphic novels.

Assessment: Assess student's participation and contributions in the questioning process. Ask student's to write an essay about the process of connecting biographical events to be represented in the comic life form.

Lesson 3-Digital Stories

Please Note: Teachers should consult with their districts internet policy before publishing student's names or photos for this lesson. A school based website is the best location to protect student's privacy.

In this lesson students will use the digital storytelling process to visually represent their mini biographies that they have written about each other. They will learn how to make art and text work together, and how to use technology in creative ways. Writing a script, based on their biography, is the most important part of the process for students because it forces them to think through how the words will explain the images.

Anticipatory Set: Read *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs!* "as told" by Jon Scieszka and illustrated by Lane Smith(1989) where the story is narrated by the wolf instead of the pigs. The wolf's actions are interpreted differently from the original version. Ask students to think about how the point-of-view in this version changed the details that were emphasized in the story. Ask students to consider what piece of their biography they are going to tell and from what point-of-view.

Direct Instruction: Remind students that their digital story is only 7-10 minutes in length so they have to pick a compelling part of their biography to digitize. Have them identify a singular theme or meaning to build their story around. Begin by having them look at picture books so they can see that they only need a few words to accompany their pictures. Stress that although the words are a few they must represent the image in an impactful manner. Then have students write a few short paragraphs to turn into a script with no extraneous words or ideas. Next have students read their own stories out loud so they can be recorded. There is power in students hearing their voices and they are placing their personal stamp on the tone and mood for their story. Finally, students can add their digital photos they took when they interviewed a family member. If photos are not available students can download clipart or photos from the Internet to tell their story. Finally, students can use *Digitales*; the Apple Learning Interchange site to see examples of digital stories. Digital stories can be published using Mac OSX-I Movie or Windows XP- Moviemaker

Activity: Set up links for students

To browse and see online examples of digital storytelling at www.digitales.us

To discuss storytelling elements many digital stories have in common and view the elements in action at: www.storycenter.org

To select art resources at www.pics4learning.com

Assessment: Ask students to answer the following questions about their biographers' digital story.

What do they like about a particular digital story? /Are there any surprises in the story?

What do they not like and why? /Is the story interesting?

Does the beginning grab their attention? /Does the ending fit the story?

Are there any questions the writer does not answer but should?

Resources

Teacher Resources

Golden, John. *Reading in the Reel World*. National Council of Teachers of English, 2006. Teaching Documentaries and other Nonfiction

Texts

Goodwillie, Susan. *Voices From the Future*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1993. A Compilation of Teenage Stories that discuss personal issues affecting their home life.

John, Amos. "Black Like Obama: What the Junior Illinois Senator's Appearance on the National Scene Reveals about Race in America, and Where We Should Go from Here." *Thurgood Marshall Law Review* 31.1, Fall 2005: 79-100. An intimate look at race and the role it plays in politics.

Jr., Dr. Martin Luther King. "Transformed Nonconformists." In *Strength To Love*, by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 21. Cleveland: First Fortress Press, 1963. An epistolary narrative that contains principles to live by.

Kennedy, Robert F. Radio Interview, Washington, DC: Voice of America, 1961. A speech on conditions in America that others thought only existed in third world countries.

Lee, Hermoine. *Biography, A Very Short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. A detailed synopsis of the ten rules that govern biography writing.

LIFE. *The American Journey of Barack Obama*. New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2008. A pictorial biography that details Obamas campaign trail interspersed with personal family moments

M, Connell Jean. "Restoring aesthetic experiences in the school curriculum: The Legacy of Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory from Literature as Exploration." *Educational Foundations*, Winter, 2001. A research paper describing the present day use of these prominent reading theories

Mariotte. *Presidential Material*. San Diego: IDW Publishing, 2008. A graphic novel that features President Obama and a separate story on Senator John McCain as his opponent.

Miller, Lisa C. *Make Me a Story*. Stenhouse Publishers, 2010. A detailed look at the writing process being wed to technology in the elementary classroom

Obama, Barack. *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995. A compelling look at Obama as a young man searching for his identity, a community, and his purpose in life.

Omartian, Stormie. *The Power of a Praying Woman*. Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 2006. Bible

Ramos, Constance F. *Our Friend Barry: Classmates Recollections of Barack Obama and Punahou School*. Lulu.com, 2008. A personal collection of fond remembrances about Obama during his time in Hawaii

Remnick, David. "The Joshua Generation." In *The Bridge*, by David Remnick, 20. New York: Alfred A Knopf, a division of Random House, 2010. A comprehensive portrait of the myriad of people, places, and events that led Obama to the White House.

Ruth Curran Neild, Robert Balfanz. *Unfulfilled Promise: The Dimensions and Characteristics of Philadelphia's Dropout Crisis 2000-2005*. Study, Philadelphia: John Hopkins Center for Social research, 2004-2005. A longitudinal study of Philadelphia's teenage dropouts.

Student Resources

Suskind Ron, *A Hope in the Unseen: An American Odyssey from the Inner City to the Ivy League*, Broadway Books, 1998. The inspiring true story of a ferociously determined young man who, armed only with his intellect and his willpower, fights his way out of

despair.

Appendix A

A More Perfect Union-Obama's Speech On Race

"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union."

Two hundred and twenty one years ago, in a hall that still stands across the street, a group of men gathered and, with these simple words, launched America's improbable experiment in democracy. Farmers and scholars; statesmen and patriots who had traveled across an ocean to escape tyranny and persecution finally made real their declaration of independence at a Philadelphia convention that lasted through the spring of 1787.

The document they produced was eventually signed but ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation's original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.

Of course, the answer to the slavery question was already embedded within our Constitution - a Constitution that had at its very core the ideal of equal citizenship under the law; a Constitution that promised its people liberty, and justice, and a union that could be and should be perfected over time.

And yet words on a parchment would not be enough to deliver slaves from bondage, or provide men and women of every color and creed their full rights and obligations as citizens of the United States. What would be needed were Americans in successive generations who were willing to do their part - through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through a civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk - to narrow that gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this campaign - to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for the presidency at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together - unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction - towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own American story.

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton's Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I've gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world's poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners - an inheritance we pass on to our two

precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.

It's a story that hasn't made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts - that out of many, we are truly one.

Throughout the first year of this campaign, against all predictions to the contrary, we saw how hungry the American people were for this message of unity. Despite the temptation to view my candidacy through a purely racial lens, we won commanding victories in states with some of the whitest populations in the country. In South Carolina, where the Confederate Flag still flies, we built a powerful coalition of African Americans and white Americans.

This is not to say that race has not been an issue in the campaign. At various stages in the campaign, some commentators have deemed me either "too black" or "not black enough." We saw racial tensions bubble to the surface during the week before the South Carolina primary. The press has scoured every exit poll for the latest evidence of racial polarization, not just in terms of white and black, but black and brown as well.

And yet, it has only been in the last couple of weeks that the discussion of race in this campaign has taken a particularly divisive turn.

On one end of the spectrum, we've heard the implication that my candidacy is somehow an exercise in affirmative action; that it's based solely on the desire of wide-eyed liberals to purchase racial reconciliation on the cheap. On the other end, we've heard my former pastor, Reverend Jeremiah Wright, use incendiary language to express views that have the potential not only to widen the racial divide, but views that denigrate both the greatness and the goodness of our nation; that rightly offend white and black alike.

I have already condemned, in unequivocal terms, the statements of Reverend Wright that have caused such controversy. For some, nagging questions remain. Did I know him to be an occasionally fierce critic of American domestic and foreign policy? Of course. Did I ever hear him make remarks that could be considered controversial while I sat in church? Yes. Did I strongly disagree with many of his political views? Absolutely - just as I'm sure many of you have heard remarks from your pastors, priests, or rabbis with which you strongly disagreed.

But the remarks that have caused this recent firestorm weren't simply controversial. They weren't simply a religious leader's effort to speak out against perceived injustice. Instead, they expressed a profoundly distorted view of this country - a view that sees white racism as endemic, and that elevates what is wrong with America above all that we know is right with America; a view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam.

As such, Reverend Wright's comments were not only wrong but divisive, divisive at a time when we need unity; racially charged at a time when we need to come together to solve a set of monumental problems - two wars, a terrorist threat, a falling economy, a chronic health care crisis and potentially devastating climate change; problems that are neither black or white or Latino or Asian, but rather problems that confront us all.

Given my background, my politics, and my professed values and ideals, there will no doubt be those for whom my statements of condemnation are not enough. Why associate myself with Reverend Wright in the first

place, they may ask? Why not join another church? And I confess that if all that I knew of Reverend Wright were the snippets of those sermons that have run in an endless loop on the television and You Tube, or if Trinity United Church of Christ conformed to the caricatures being peddled by some commentators, there is no doubt that I would react in much the same way

But the truth is, that isn't all that I know of the man. The man I met more than twenty years ago is a man who helped introduce me to my Christian faith, a man who spoke to me about our obligations to love one another; to care for the sick and lift up the poor. He is a man who served his country as a U.S. Marine; who has studied and lectured at some of the finest universities and seminaries in the country, and who for over thirty years led a church that serves the community by doing God's work here on Earth - by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS.

In my first book, *Dreams From My Father*, I described the experience of my first service at Trinity:

"People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters....And in that single note - hope! - I heard something else; at the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories - of survival, and freedom, and hope - became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black; in chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a means to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about...memories that all people might study and cherish - and with which we could start to rebuild."

That has been my experience at Trinity. Like other predominantly black churches across the country, Trinity embodies the black community in its entirety - the doctor and the welfare mom, the model student and the former gang-banger. Like other black churches, Trinity's services are full of raucous laughter and sometimes bawdy humor. They are full of dancing, clapping, screaming and shouting that may seem jarring to the untrained ear. The church contains in full the kindness and cruelty, the fierce intelligence and the shocking ignorance, the struggles and successes, the love and yes, the bitterness and bias that make up the black experience in America.

And this helps explain, perhaps, my relationship with Reverend Wright. As imperfect as he may be, he has been like family to me. He strengthened my faith, officiated my wedding, and baptized my children. Not once in my conversations with him have I heard him talk about any ethnic group in derogatory terms, or treat whites with whom he interacted with anything but courtesy and respect. He contains within him the contradictions - the good and the bad - of the community that he has served diligently for so many years.

I can no more disown him than I can disown the black community. I can no more disown him than I can my white grandmother - a woman who helped raise me, a woman who sacrificed again and again for me, a woman who loves me as much as she loves anything in this world, but a woman who once confessed her fear of black men who passed by her on the street, and who on more than one occasion has uttered racial or ethnic stereotypes that made me cringe.

These people are a part of me. And they are a part of America, this country that I love.

Some will see this as an attempt to justify or excuse comments that are simply inexcusable. I can assure you it is not. I suppose the politically safe thing would be to move on from this episode and just hope that it fades into the woodwork. We can dismiss Reverend Wright as a crank or a demagogue, just as some have dismissed Geraldine Ferraro, in the aftermath of her recent statements, as harboring some deep-seated racial bias.

But race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now. We would be making the same mistake that Reverend Wright made in his offending sermons about America - to simplify and stereotype and amplify the negative to the point that it distorts reality.

The fact is that the comments that have been made and the issues that have surfaced over the last few weeks reflect the complexities of race in this country that we've never really worked through - a part of our union that we have yet to perfect. And if we walk away now, if we simply retreat into our respective corners, we will never be able to come together and solve challenges like health care, or education, or the need to find good jobs for every American.

Understanding this reality requires a reminder of how we arrived at this point. As William Faulkner once wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past." We do not need to recite here the history of racial injustice in this country. But we do need to remind ourselves that so many of the disparities that exist in the African-American community today can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow.

Segregated schools were, and are, inferior schools; we still haven't fixed them, fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, and the inferior education they provided, then and now, helps explain the pervasive achievement gap between today's black and white students.

Legalized discrimination - where blacks were prevented, often through violence, from owning property, or loans were not granted to African-American business owners, or black homeowners could not access FHA mortgages, or blacks were excluded from unions, or the police force, or fire departments - meant that black families could not amass any meaningful wealth to bequeath to future generations. That history helps explain the wealth and income gap between black and white, and the concentrated pockets of poverty that persists in so many of today's urban and rural communities.

A lack of economic opportunity among black men, and the shame and frustration that came from not being able to provide for one's family, contributed to the erosion of black families - a problem that welfare policies for many years may have worsened. And the lack of basic services in so many urban black neighborhoods - parks for kids to play in, police walking the beat, regular garbage pick-up and building code enforcement - all helped create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us.

This is the reality in which Reverend Wright and other African-Americans of his generation grew up. They came of age in the late fifties and early sixties, a time when segregation was still the law of the land and opportunity was systematically constricted. What's remarkable is not how many failed in the face of discrimination, but rather how many men and women overcame the odds; how many were able to make a way out of no way for those like me who would come after them.

But for all those who scratched and clawed their way to get a piece of the American Dream, there were many who didn't make it - those who were ultimately defeated, in one way or another, by discrimination. That legacy of defeat was passed on to future generations - those young men and increasingly young women who we see standing on street corners or languishing in our prisons, without hope or prospects for the future. Even

for those blacks who did make it, questions of race, and racism, continue to define their worldview in fundamental ways. For the men and women of Reverend Wright's generation, the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away; nor has the anger and the bitterness of those years. That anger may not get expressed in public, in front of white co-workers or white friends. But it does find voice in the barbershop or around the kitchen table. At times, that anger is exploited by politicians, to gin up votes along racial lines, or to make up for a politician's own failings.

And occasionally it finds voice in the church on Sunday morning, in the pulpit and in the pews. The fact that so many people are surprised to hear that anger in some of Reverend Wright's sermons simply reminds us of the old truism that the most segregated hour in American life occurs on Sunday morning. That anger is not always productive; indeed, all too often it distracts attention from solving real problems; it keeps us from squarely facing our own complicity in our condition, and prevents the African-American community from forging the alliances it needs to bring about real change. But the anger is real; it is powerful; and to simply wish it away, to condemn it without understanding its roots, only serves to widen the chasm of misunderstanding that exists between the races.

In fact, a similar anger exists within segments of the white community. Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. Their experience is the immigrant experience - as far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything, they've built it from scratch. They've worked hard all their lives, many times only to see their jobs shipped overseas or their pension dumped after a lifetime of labor. They are anxious about their futures, and feel their dreams slipping away; in an era of stagnant wages and global competition, opportunity comes to be seen as a zero sum game, in which your dreams come at my expense. So when they are told to bus their children to a school across town; when they hear that an African American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed; when they're told that their fears about crime in urban neighborhoods are somehow prejudiced, resentment builds over time.

Like the anger within the black community, these resentments aren't always expressed in polite company. But they have helped shape the political landscape for at least a generation. Anger over welfare and affirmative action helped forge the Reagan Coalition. Politicians routinely exploited fears of crime for their own electoral ends. Talk show hosts and conservative commentators built entire careers unmasking bogus claims of racism while dismissing legitimate discussions of racial injustice and inequality as mere political correctness or reverse racism.

Just as black anger often proved counterproductive, so have these white resentments distracted attention from the real culprits of the middle class squeeze - a corporate culture rife with inside dealing, questionable accounting practices, and short-term greed; a Washington dominated by lobbyists and special interests; economic policies that favor the few over the many. And yet, to wish away the resentments of white Americans, to label them as misguided or even racist, without recognizing they are grounded in legitimate concerns - this too widens the racial divide, and blocks the path to understanding.

This is where we are right now. It's a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years. Contrary to the claims of some of my critics, black and white, I have never been so naïve as to believe that we can get beyond our racial divisions in a single election cycle, or with a single candidacy - particularly a candidacy as imperfect as my own.

But I have asserted a firm conviction - a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people - that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have

no choice is we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.

For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances - for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs - to the larger aspirations of all Americans — the white woman struggling to break the glass ceiling, the white man whose been laid off, the immigrant trying to feed his family. And it means taking full responsibility for own lives - by demanding more from our fathers, and spending more time with our children, and reading to them, and teaching them that while they may face challenges and discrimination in their own lives, they must never succumb to despair or cynicism; they must always believe that they can write their own destiny.

Ironically, this quintessentially American - and yes, conservative - notion of self-help found frequent expression in Reverend Wright's sermons. But what my former pastor too often failed to understand is that embarking on a program of self-help also requires a belief that society can change.

The profound mistake of Reverend Wright's sermons is not that he spoke about racism in our society. It's that he spoke as if our society was static; as if no progress has been made; as if this country - a country that has made it possible for one of his own members to run for the highest office in the land and build a coalition of white and black; Latino and Asian, rich and poor, young and old — is still irrevocably bound to a tragic past. But what we know — what we have seen - is that America can change. That is true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope - the audacity to hope - for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.

In the white community, the path to a more perfect union means acknowledging that what ails the African-American community does not just exist in the minds of black people; that the legacy of discrimination - and current incidents of discrimination, while less overt than in the past - are real and must be addressed. Not just with words, but with deeds - by investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations. It requires all Americans to realize that your dreams do not have to come at the expense of my dreams; that investing in the health, welfare, and education of black and brown and white children will ultimately help all of America prosper.

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand - that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.

For we have a choice in this country. We can accept a politics that breeds division, and conflict, and cynicism. We can tackle race only as spectacle - as we did in the OJ trial - or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina - or as fodder for the nightly news. We can play Reverend Wright's sermons on every channel, every day and talk about them from now until the election, and make the only question in this campaign whether or not the American people think that I somehow believe or sympathize with his most offensive words. We can pounce on some gaffe by a Hillary supporter as evidence that she's playing the race card, or we can speculate on whether white men will all flock to John McCain in the general election regardless of his policies.

We can do that.

But if we do, I can tell you that in the next election, we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then

another one. And then another one. And nothing will change.

That is one option. Or, at this moment, in this election, we can come together and say, "Not this time." This time we want to talk about the crumbling schools that are stealing the future of black children and white children and Asian children and Hispanic children and Native American children. This time we want to reject the cynicism that tells us that these kids can't learn; that those kids who don't look like us are somebody else's problem. The children of America are not those kids, they are our kids, and we will not let them fall behind in a 21st century economy. Not this time.

This time we want to talk about how the lines in the Emergency Room are filled with whites and blacks and Hispanics who do not have health care; who don't have the power on their own to overcome the special interests in Washington, but who can take them on if we do it together.

This time we want to talk about the shuttered mills that once provided a decent life for men and women of every race, and the homes for sale that once belonged to Americans from every religion, every region, every walk of life. This time we want to talk about the fact that the real problem is not that someone who doesn't look like you might take your job; it's that the corporation you work for will ship it overseas for nothing more than a profit.

This time we want to talk about the men and women of every color and creed who serve together, and fight together, and bleed together under the same proud flag. We want to talk about how to bring them home from a war that never should've been authorized and never should've been waged, and we want to talk about how we'll show our patriotism by caring for them, and their families, and giving them the benefits they have earned.

I would not be running for President if I didn't believe with all my heart that this is what the vast majority of Americans want for this country. This union may never be perfect, but generation after generation has shown that it can always be perfected. And today, whenever I find myself feeling doubtful or cynical about this possibility, what gives me the most hope is the next generation - the young people whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.

There is one story in particular that I'd like to leave you with today - a story I told when I had the great honor of speaking on Dr. King's birthday at his home church, Ebenezer Baptist, in Atlanta.

There is a young, twenty-three year old white woman named Ashley Baia who organized for our campaign in Florence, South Carolina. She had been working to organize a mostly African-American community since the beginning of this campaign, and one day she was at a roundtable discussion where everyone went around telling their story and why they were there.

And Ashley said that when she was nine years old, her mother got cancer. And because she had to miss days of work, she was let go and lost her health care. They had to file for bankruptcy, and that's when Ashley decided that she had to do something to help her mom.

She knew that food was one of their most expensive costs, and so Ashley convinced her mother that what she really liked and really wanted to eat more than anything else was mustard and relish sandwiches. Because that was the cheapest way to eat.

She did this for a year until her mom got better, and she told everyone at the roundtable that the reason she

joined our campaign was so that she could help the millions of other children in the country who want and need to help their parents too.

Now Ashley might have made a different choice. Perhaps somebody told her along the way that the source of her mother's problems were blacks who were on welfare and too lazy to work, or Hispanics who were coming into the country illegally. But she didn't. She sought out allies in her fight against injustice.

Anyway, Ashley finishes her story and then goes around the room and asks everyone else why they're supporting the campaign. They all have different stories and reasons. Many bring up a specific issue. And finally they come to this elderly black man who's been sitting there quietly the entire time. And Ashley asks him why he's there. And he does not bring up a specific issue. He does not say health care or the economy. He does not say education or the war. He does not say that he was there because of Barack Obama. He simply says to everyone in the room, "I am here because of Ashley."

"I'm here because of Ashley." By itself, that single moment of recognition between that young white girl and that old black man is not enough. It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless, or education to our children.

But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger. And as so many generations have come to realize over the course of the two-hundred and twenty one years since a band of patriots signed that document in Philadelphia, which is where the perfection begins.

Endnotes

1. (M Winter, 2001)
2. (Lee 2009)
3. (Obama 1995)
4. (Ramos 2008)
5. (Ruth Curran Neild, Robert Balfanz 2004-2005)
6. (Jr. 1963)
7. (Goodwillie 1993)
8. (Kennedy 1961)
9. (Remnick 2010)
10. (Omartian 2006)
11. (John Fall 2005)
12. (Obama 1995)
13. (Obama 1995)
14. (Obama 1995)
15. (Obama 1995)

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use