

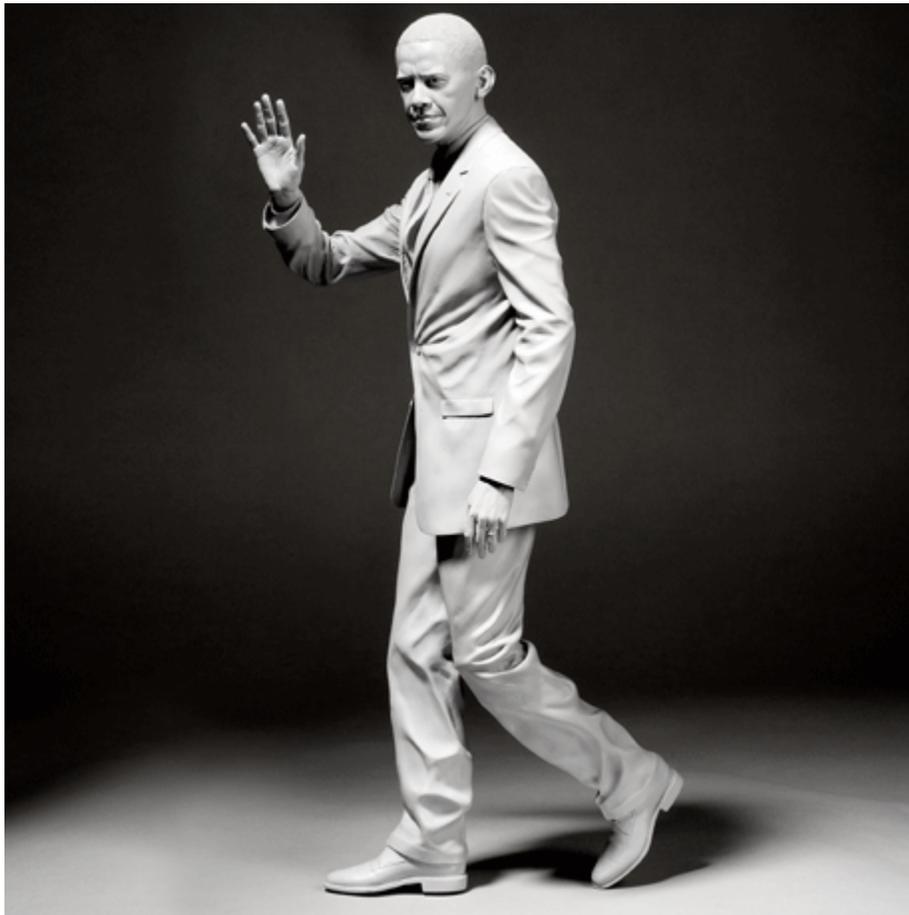
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Barack Obama: Papa in Chief

The president's methods are easier to understand if you look less to Rahm Emanuel and more to Sasha and Malia

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By: Tom Junod



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I understand Barack

Obama. It is not always easy, [Share](#) but I do. I can even relate to him. Of course, we weren't supposed to need to. He was supposed to be above that. He was never supposed to be an everyman, and never pretended to be. He transcended beer tests, barbecue tests, and the rest — the tests of whether he was "likable" enough as a politician. It didn't matter whether I wanted to have a beer with him or not, and nobody asked. He was Barack Obama. What he represented was much larger than any individual, even himself. It is not necessarily a good thing that I've come to understand him. But I do. I even have a guide for understanding him. It's a sheet of paper, taped to the inside of a kitchen cabinet. It does not say "Understanding Barack Obama" at the top. It says "Principles of Positive Discipline." I use it, most often, when I'm frustrated with my daughter, who's six. That's what it's designed for. But I also use it when I'm trying to understand Barack Obama, and it works every time.

Indeed, it works better as a guide for

understanding Barack Obama than it does as a guide for relieving my frustrations with my daughter, because he is my president, not my child. He's not the one sticking his hands in the butter or splashing the bathroom mirror.

Positive discipline is a movement and a brand, the fountainhead of an ongoing flood of books, workshops, lectures, and family-therapy practices. Even if you've never heard of it, you're affected by it, because at bottom it's a philosophy of parenting. I learned about it two years ago, when my wife and I attended a positive-discipline workshop at my daughter's school. She was four at the time, and we were frustrated; we were having trouble exercising authority with our daughter — all right, *over* our daughter — without having those exercises escalate into battles of will that could only be won at the cost of yelling and threats. We did not hit our daughter, never came close, but I got so angry at times that I could feel the anger rippling over me as a physical current, as a kind of heat that made the hair stand up on my arms. Worse, my anger seemed to divest me of authority instead of augmenting it, and our daughter, after a while, not only had no fear of it, she worked relentlessly and efficiently toward eliciting it. She *wanted* me to get angry, and I was only too happy to oblige. And she was only *four*, for God's sake. Was this

how it was going to be for the rest of our *lives*?

And the lady leading the positive-discipline workshop smiled — the lady leading the positive-discipline workshop always smiles — and said, "She's probably frustrated, too."

(Reconciling with Obama? [Click here to e-mail the author](#), and Tom Junod will answer reader questions here next week.)

Am I frustrated with Barack Obama? Of course I am. Everybody's frustrated with Barack Obama. We like him, we're glad he's president, but we're frustrated with him. Sure, he's done a lot more than he's gotten credit for. Sure, he's basically governed as he said he was going to govern in *The Audacity of Hope*. He's even been audacious, especially if audacity can be measured by expenditure. But when does the "hope" part start? When does the *Obama* part start? It's as if we voted for Miles — that ease, that seething grace — and got Wynton instead, a careful custodian of a tradition that nobody likes as much as they say they do.

I am not suggesting that the principles of positive discipline teach me to deal with my Obama frustration in the same way that they teach me to deal with my daughter frustration — that they encourage me to think of Obama as a child. No, far from it. They encourage me to think of Obama as a *father*, specifically as the father of two young children, specifically as the father of two young children in the first years of the twenty-first century. People who try to explain or excoriate Obama try to do so in terms of his influences, in terms of Saul Alinsky, Bill Ayers, Jeremiah Wright, Rahm Emanuel, or his wife, Michelle. I explain him in terms of Sasha and Malia.

The positive-discipline workshop was held on a Saturday, and it lasted all day. There was a lot of skepticism at first — hell, there was a lot of shamefacedness, because everybody felt like there was an admission of failure, an admission that we had some kind of *problem*. But there we were, and pretty soon came the moment we all dreaded: role-playing. In the interest of empathy, the workshop leader selected two parents and asked one to put the other in a time-out. "How does that make you feel?" she asked, a question that elicited from the isolated parent the dutiful confession: "Powerless."

"Wait a second. What's wrong with a time-out?" I asked.

"What's wrong with a time-in?" the workshop leader serenely responded.

"Are you saying that you should never punish your children?"

"There is no punishment in positive discipline," she said.

He is a well-defined man — a man who knows himself by all accounts and is, as the saying goes, comfortable in his own skin — whose presidency has lacked defining moments. One, though, came when he was called a liar in front of Congress, in front of the American public, and in front of the world. As Obama was making his case for health-care reform to a joint session of Congress, a Republican congressman from South Carolina interrupted him with the words "You lie!" It was not only a defining moment; it was an unprecedented one, which, in bygone days, the president of the United States would have felt obliged to answer by inviting the accuser to a duel. And yet the moment, and the furor that arose from Joe Wilson's mortal insult, passed, largely at Obama's urging. He accepted Wilson's apology and, as he is wont to do, tried to turn the occasion into what the language of modern parenting calls a "teachable moment." Asked if he would talk to Wilson again, Obama answered, "I talk to everybody," and let it go at that.

There is no punishment in the Obama White House.

You don't have to win, we were told at the positive-discipline workshop. Your child is not damaged, morally, if your child wins, if the battle is withdrawn, or, better yet, never joined. Our culture has viewed parenthood in terms of decisive moments, but it's better to view it in terms of development, as a continual process, and to be in it for the long haul. Nothing lies like the moment of truth, and if there's no powerlessness, then there are fewer power struggles. If your child has a problem with authority, it's likely that *you* have a problem with authority, or your lack of it. The answer is to return it to your child in the form of choices, while you set an example. Your example *is* your authority. Positive discipline does not mean *no* discipline; it means that discipline is a matter of teaching mutual respect, rather than making your child suffer. "Children do better when they feel better, not worse," is what it says on my kitchen cabinet, and so when faced with intransigence, parents have to respond by stating their expectations, repeating the rules, and then giving their children the love and support they need to follow them. Always try to include, rather than isolate; avoid labels; don't negotiate, but don't escalate, either. If your children are not doing well, either take them out of the situation or remove yourself. You — and they — can always try again.

It is a philosophy that could have been minted by Cass Sunstein, the White House advisor who is developing ways to "nudge" citizens to make the right choices without them being aware of the manipulation. It could serve as a précis for how Obama has dealt with Joe Wilson, not to mention Skip Gates and Sergeant Jim Crowley, not to mention Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was never threatened but rather told to "think carefully" while answering the protests

of the Iranian presidential election with the truncheon and the gallows. One could almost hear Obama saying, "Use your words, Mahmoud. Use your words."

The things we liked about him have turned out to be the things that drive us crazy about him. After eight years of the Decider, we elected the Deliberator — well, okay, the Very Charismatic Deliberator with High Symbolic Value — and now we've decided that he's too deliberative, too methodical, too cool, too unemotional, too even-tempered, too nondemonstrative, too rational, too conciliatory, too promodernising. The problem with the president, we're told, is that he operates at some kind of emotional remove from us, which makes him, even in the view of his admirers, a Vulcan, and in the view of his enemies, a literal alien, who by temperament and maybe even birthright could never be considered "one of us." But this is bullshit, even by the standards of punditry and political hackery. The problem with the president is that he *is* one of us after all, and we hear in his stoic cadences an echo of our own anodyne voices when we tell our misbehaving children, "Honey, I know you can make better choices." He is like us in that he is an authority figure at a time when we are ambivalent about our authority and then, because we're Americans, ambivalent about our ambivalence. He just happens to be the president, and he forces us to consider what happens when the most powerful man on earth is also a man who would rather avoid power struggles.

(Tom Junod is taking reader questions! [Click here to e-mail the author](#), and your thoughts could be published here next week.)

So I bought it. Positive-discipline or, more precisely, the principles and techniques of positive discipline, which means that I'm one of *them*: one of those guys who never raises his voice to his child, who uses the word *inappropriate* instead of *wrong*, who folds his child in a hug when she is raising hell, who "chooses his battles," who "doesn't take the bait," who "de-escalates," and who, above all, does not punish, no matter how bad — um, inappropriate — the behavior is. And you know what? It's changed my life. Our lives. We don't fight anymore. My wife and I employ kindness and firmness — positive-discipline bywords — and our daughter is happy and cooperative. It takes a lot of work, though, because, well, it's *unnatural*. You have to devote a lot of time to it, really your whole life. You have to be strong, because you risk appearing weak. Or maybe not — maybe I'm just avoiding confrontation. Our daughter still splashes the bathroom mirror, after all. I just have less invested in making her stop, and when she's done, I ask her, politely, to clean up. She always does.

Now, I have no idea exactly how Obama disciplines or doesn't discipline Sasha and Malia, though the principles of positive discipline are virtually identical to the principles of community organization, which is what started him in politics — positive discipline is community organization writ small. Indeed, I have heard the principles of positive discipline espoused from the pulpits of leftish churches and also at a support group I attended to learn how to deal with a relative who is mentally ill. They have currency everywhere, especially among the class of educated people who hand out dried fruit for Halloween instead of candy, as the Obamas did. We are in the middle of a profound social experiment in which our assumptions about power are being challenged in the most fundamental way — that is, in our own families. Barack Obama, then, is not the agent of change; he's the fulfillment of a change that is already occurring culture-wide, in every place but politics. That's why the Republicans fear him so much; why, while waiting for him to fail, they just come off as the political party for people who want to hit their kids.

Nobody espouses philosophies anymore, and fewer and fewer people espouse their faith. We are, however, prepared to speak endlessly about our favored philosophy of parenting, and this takes the place of the other two. For centuries, parents believed their primary obligation to their children was to keep them from the fires of hell; short of that, any amount of corporal punishment was justified. As we have shifted away from religious belief toward rationalism, we have shifted our methods of punishment, until we have arrived at the prescription of no punishment at all. The belief behind the "time-in" — essentially a hug — is that children are not sinful beings but rather imperfectly rational ones, capable of empathy and enlightened self-interest. Obama, for all his professions of faith, represents the triumph of the secular movement of our society. Although his language is drawn from religion, his principles, like the principles of positive discipline and community organization, are drawn from therapy.

He is the first truly modern president, because he is the first president to govern as if there is no evil, only lost opportunities for good. He is the first post-evil president.

He clearly likes being president, and seems unburdened by it. The burden has been the burden of power, which is one of the reasons his presidency has been emotionally unsatisfying — it is bereft of power's pleasures. Most Americans respond to strength and decisiveness in a president the same way they do in a father. It has been unsettling to have a president whose agenda for change includes changing our very notions of strength and weakness, and whose idea of decisiveness seems to involve mostly making good choices, which is not necessarily leadership. He has been able to lead by inspiration but unable to simply lean on people, and unwilling to try on the world stage. His uncertainty as an authority figure may or may not have encouraged our foreign enemies, but it has certainly emboldened his domestic ones, who seemed confused about whether to call him a tyrant or a weakling until they realized, like schoolboys, that they weren't going to be punished and started calling him whatever they damn well pleased. You could argue that he has outflanked them — that by allowing the Republicans to make themselves over into a purely revanchist party, he has made them into American Baathists, who, after proving themselves unworthy to be in power, are now proving themselves unworthy even to be out of it. But the failure of

his efforts at inclusion has been a failure of one of his central principles, and it prompts the question of whether the evolution in masculine authority represented by Barack Obama is simply a crisis by another name.

George Bush was not a post-evil president. He recognized evil and set himself up in opposition to it. He labeled it — labeled, in fact, three countries as the "axis of evil" — and was motivated by it; in the end, he countenanced it. Obama does not label, for labeling would deprive him of his ability to include, and inclusion, rather than isolation, is his goal for rogue nations. More than any other difference in policy, it is this difference that distinguishes one president from the other, to the extent that when Obama made his speech announcing that he was sending thirty thousand more Americans to Afghanistan — announcing that he was going to try to finish, with the clock running, the war that George Bush began — he never mentioned the word *evil* or *evildoer*. It was as though he were trying to conduct a war by the principles of positive discipline, and when, a few days later, he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize with a defense of war and the surprising announcement that "evil does exist," it was clearly something he felt he had to say because he didn't quite make the sale in his earlier speech. In the end, it is awfully hard to make the case for war without making the case for evil.

The biggest difficulty with all nonauthoritative approaches to authority is that, even when they work, they often don't work *right away*. Spanking a child, threatening a child, taking a child's toys away — they might not be the best thing for a child, but they generally get a child's attention. The positive parent is generally deprived of the pleasure — is it a pleasure? — of issuing an order and seeing it immediately and unquestioningly carried out. There are no orders in positive parenting, as there are no orders in the Obama administration. There are, instead, reasonable goals and clearly stated expectations. The approach is evolutionary, and on the most important domestic issue of his presidency — health-care reform — so is the Paleolithic progress of the debate. Indeed, Obama has been so nonassertive in the matter of health care that to the degree he has shown strength, he has shown strength by risking the appearance of weakness. And yet he has been utterly forthright and, in his retiring way, utterly relentless. And by the time this essay is published, he is likely to be the first president since Lyndon Johnson to appreciably change the way Americans get health care.

He has been the same with the war in Afghanistan. Is there another American president of the last thirty years who would not have felt the necessity to impose his will on General Stanley McChrystal, especially after McChrystal made an obvious public effort to box him in? But there's no punishment in the Obama administration, and the president has made it clear that he values McChrystal as a necessary source of counsel on his way to his ultimate decision.

Which, of course, was the decision to accede to three fourths of McChrystal's request for forty thousand extra troops in Afghanistan — to escalate the war. The nonauthoritative approach to authority is intended to stop wars from starting. We have no idea if it can win one that's already begun.

It's a bet, like any worldview. You really don't know how it's going to turn out, though throughout history any bet on the prospect of human enlightenment has made the bookies rich. The difference with this bet is the faith that people have in it, based on the fact that it *feels* right, and I am talking here about both nonpunitive parenting and the Obama presidency. Hell, it's the same bet, because what you're really betting on, in both instances, is time. You're betting that you, as a parent, are going to have it, or that he, as a president, is going to get it, because you're betting on the process rather than the decisive moment. Given enough time, the process always wins. That's why children generally turn out all right. That's why politics generally doesn't.

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