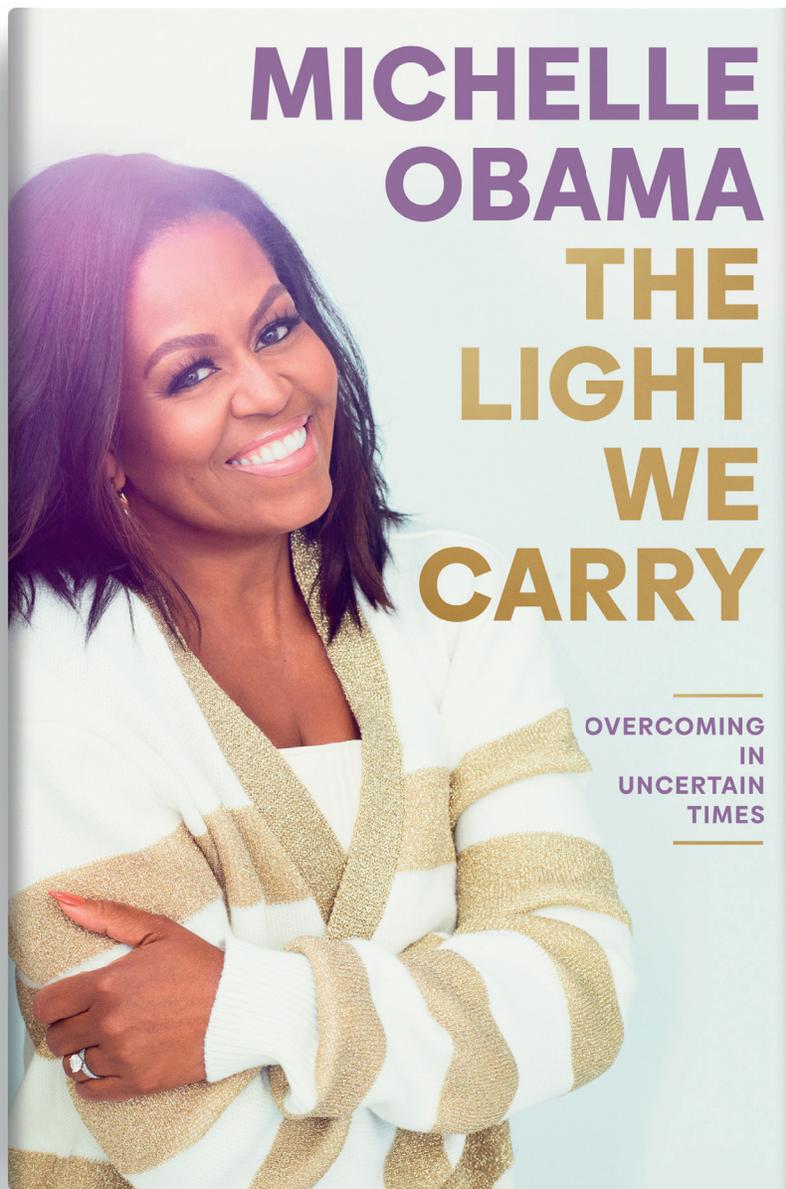


A READING GUIDE FOR

THE LIGHT WE CARRY

BY MICHELLE OBAMA



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CROWN

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO HER BOOK, Mrs. Obama discusses the process of finding strength and light within yourself: “I believe that each of us carries a bit of inner brightness, something entirely unique and individual, a flame that’s worth protecting.” What do you consider your “inner brightness,” and how do you keep that flame lit? Is there someone who brightens your life with the light they carry?

THE POWER OF SMALL

“Sometimes, it turns out, the smallest of tools can help us to sort through the largest of feelings.”

1. Discussing the early months of the pandemic, a period during which many of us were nervously watching the news and reading the dire headlines, Mrs. Obama writes: “Everything felt big. Everything felt consequential. Everything *was* big. Everything *was* consequential.” In this fraught space, Mrs. Obama discovered how the simple act of knitting helped to calm her anxious mind and counter the overwhelm. “It buckled my churning brain into the back seat and allowed my hands to drive the car for a while.” She calls this “the power of small.” Have you ever experienced the “power of small” in your own life? What are some activities you do or strategies you use to keep anxiety at bay? What have you discovered about yourself when undertaking these small acts?
2. Mrs. Obama talks about hearing from young people over the years about their ambitious dreams, including a young woman who wrote her a letter stating: “I want to take over like Beyoncé, but bigger.” However, the young woman also acknowledged that sometimes her mental health gets in the way of her drive to achieve that dream and make her family and ancestors proud. “Your mind is constantly and imperfectly working the levers, trying to keep you steady. . . . It may throw up distress signals when it senses a problem—if you’re trying to move too fast or working in a way that’s unsustainable,” writes Mrs. Obama. “It’s okay to prioritize your wellness, to make a habit of rest and repair.” Have you ever found that your mental health was impacted while you were working towards a goal, even one you were passionate about achieving? How do you prioritize rest so that you can sustain your energy for working toward your goals, both big and small?
3. Mrs. Obama recalls working in the White House garden on a “three sisters” vegetable patch, a mixed a crop of corn, beans, and squash together in one plot. The three sisters method is “a traditional Native American method for growing food in a resourceful way. . . . The corn grows tall and creates a natural pole for the bean plants to climb. The beans provide nitrogen, a nutrient that helps the other plants grow more efficiently, and the squash lays low to the ground, its large, spreading leaves helping block weeds and keep the soil moist.” As with the three sisters, Mrs. Obama describes how intermingling “the small and the tall” can result in a more balanced approach to her life and to the wider human community. When you’re feeling out of sorts—out of balance—how does that manifests itself in your life? Are there any “small” fixes like Mrs. Obama’s—taking a walk, getting some exercise, prioritizing sleep, or engaging in a hobby or activity such as knitting—that help you return to a balanced state even when you’re faced with big worries?

DECODING FEAR

“Our hurts become our fears. Our fears become our limits.”

4. Mrs. Obama unravels the ways that abstract and common fears—such as embarrassment, rejection, or facing new situations—have the power to influence our choices if we don’t learn to decode them. “Jeopardy is woven into the experience of being human,” she writes. But she argues that the fears arising in response to disorder and differentness are often worth taking on in direct ways to understand and overcome them. When in your life have you encountered something new or intimidating that elicited fear? How did you work through that fear? Did you have a different perspective on the source of your fear after you faced it?
5. “Doubt comes from within,” writes Mrs. Obama. “Your fearful mind is almost always trying to seize the steering wheel and change your course. Its whole function is to rehearse catastrophe, scare you out of opportunity, and throw rocks at your dreams.” Mrs. Obama now accepts the presence of this fearful mind, addressing its patter of negativity and self-criticism with familiarity to diminish its influence over her thoughts: *“Oh, hello. It’s you again. Thanks for showing up. For making me so alert. But I see you. You’re no monster to me.”* What has your fearful mind said to you? What are other names for this phenomenon? Have you found ways to counter the interior critique, calm the inner chatter? How would you address your own fearful mind?
6. As a contrast to the passing moments of fear Mrs. Obama describes experiencing in new and unfamiliar situations, she also discusses the tangible and legitimate fears that affected previous generations of her family and had limiting and detrimental impacts on their lives—like her grandfather Southside’s distrust of doctors which resulted in a late diagnosis of lung cancer, and her grandfather Dandy’s extreme anxiety about traveling outside of his own Chicago neighborhood. Both men were born in the Jim Crow South, and even after they moved north to Chicago, a racial caste system still presented real dangers for them if they stepped outside the bounds of their own communities. Do you recognize any lasting effects of fears like these in older generations in your own family? How do these fears impact your loved ones today, and has anything changed for younger generations?

STARTING KIND

“Real growth begins with how gladly you’re able to see yourself.”

7. “Gladness is nourishing. It is a gift. When someone is happy to see us, we get a little steadier on our feet. We have an easier time locking into our poise. And we carry that feeling forward.” Describe times in your life when you experienced the gift of gladness. Who has given it to you, and who have you given it to? How did it feel to share gladness and to receive it?
8. Mrs. Obama reveals the daily routine of her friend, Ron—every morning, he greets himself with a simple and affectionate greeting in the bathroom mirror: “Heeey, Buddy!” Mrs. Obama acknowledges that for a lot of people, including herself, the mirror can be a scary place, and that women especially are “consistently

held to higher standards when it comes to grooming and style, requiring more elaborate, more expensive, and more time-consuming preparation before feeling comfortable heading to work or even just stepping out into a new day.” The real power of starting kind, she says, comes from “redirecting any impulse to judge or self-denigrate . . . [and beginning] instead with a simple message of compassion and approval.” How can you give yourself a “deliberately kind start” in the morning like Ron does?

AM I SEEN?

“How you view yourself becomes everything. It’s your foundation, the starting point for changing the world around you.”

9. Everywhere Mrs. Obama goes, she meets people who describe the self-consciousness that comes with feeling like you don’t belong in the space you’re in. She writes: “Nearly everyone on earth experiences this sort of feeling at some point—that prickling awareness that you’re somehow not suited to your environment, that you’re being viewed as a trespasser.” Describe a time in your life when you felt this way. How did you navigate the situation?
10. Reflect on Mrs. Obama’s statement: “It’s hard to dream about what’s not visible” and how it relates to many of our most contentious debates, from the existence of systemic racism to the shadow of slavery to the reality of LGBTQ+ lives. As she notes: “We need to stay aware of whose stories are being told and whose are being erased. This is a battle over who matters, about who gets to be seen.” What is something you now know about our history that you weren’t taught about in school? Why do you think people want to cherry-pick what is taught and what is ignored, and what might they achieve by doing so?
11. Finish this sentence: “When I am seen, I feel _____.”

MY KITCHEN TABLE

“In a true friendship, you remove your filters. . . . They know my truest feelings, my truest self, and I know theirs.”

12. Mrs. Obama defines her “Kitchen Table” as “the people beyond my family who I trust, delight in, and rely on most—and for whom I would do anything.” Do you have your own “Kitchen Table”, and if so, who does it include? What do you bring out in each other?
13. Mrs. Obama is not someone who takes friendship lightly. “For me, friendships are both a commitment and a lifeline, and I hold onto them as such, tightly and deliberately.” Why is friendship so important in our lives? Describe what you consider essential attributes in a close friend.
14. “Discomfort is a teacher,” Mrs. Obama writes: “Lack of reward is a teacher. Dealing with these things gives us practice at life, helping us figure out who we are when we’re a little pushed.” When in your life has discomfort been a teacher and what did you learn?

PARTNERING WELL

“When you know your own light, you are then better prepared to share it with another person.”

15. Mrs. Obama speaks a lot to the importance of curiosity, both in starting friendships and in romantic relationships. With her husband Barack, she came to realize: “This guy, his curiosity, added light to my world.” Why do you think Barack’s sense of curiosity, in particular, stood out to Mrs. Obama more than other traits? Is there someone in your life whose sense of curiosity sparks you?
16. How has a spouse, significant other, friend, or loved one added light to your world? Have your thoughts on what a fulfilling and supportive relationship looks like changed over time and with experience?
17. “It helps if you enter into a committed relationship prepared to work,” writes Mrs. Obama, “ready to be humbled, and willing to accept and even enjoy living in that in-between space, bouncing between the poles of beautiful and horrible, sometimes in the span of a single conversation, sometimes over the course of years.” What are some compromises you and your significant other have had to make? How do you deal with the natural ebb and flow that takes place over the course of long-term relationships, whether romantic or platonic?
18. Okay, where do you stand on the Great Toilet Paper Dispute of 1960? Are you an over-the-roll toilet paper family, like the Obamas, or under-the-roll, like the Robinsons were during Mrs. Obama’s childhood? Defend your position. Have you ever had to compromise this position for the sake of your marriage or your relationship with a housemate?

MEET MY MOM

“Over the years, I’ve had one secret weapon to help stem the tide of parental anxiety . . . and that’s my own mother.”

19. Mrs. Obama got her mother’s permission to share some of her pearls of parental wisdom: Teach your kids to wake themselves up; Good parents are always working to put themselves out of business; Parent the child you’ve got. . . . Which of her maxims resonated with you most and why?
20. On parenting, Mrs. Obama says that she and her brother, Craig, were encouraged to speak their minds at the dinner table, allowed to horse around on the couch, and expected to make their own beds in the morning. Many of these basic expectations were a complete contrast to how Mrs. Obama’s own mother, Marian, was raised. What were the rules in your house growing up? Do you have a different perspective on any of those rules now than you did as a child? If you’re a parent, what are your basic rules around the house and how did you come by those rules?
21. One night when Mrs. Obama’s daughters were young, Barack was traveling, and she was sagging on her feet after a long day, she was pushed to the limits of her patience and told Malia and Sasha that

she quit her job as their mother: “You seem to think you don’t need a mother . . . I am handing you your own little lives and you can manage them yourselves. I don’t care.” What did this incident reveal to Mrs. Obama about how she might apply her mother’s advice to “parent the child you’ve got”? If you grew up with siblings, did your parents tailor their approach to your personalities and needs? Do you adapt your interactions with the children in your life to suit their individual temperaments?

- 22.** Mrs. Obama writes a lot about the idea of home, which means different things to different people. For some, home is a specific person, a warm hug, or a place to put your feet up. For others, home is fraught, a painful place or time to which you never want to return. “And that is okay. There’s power in knowing where you don’t want to go. And then there’s also power in discovering where you want to head next. How do we build places where gladness lives—for ourselves and for others, and most especially for children—and to which we will always want to return?” Describe your idea of home.

THE WHOLE OF US

“When we share our stories with fullness and honesty, we often discover that we’re less alone and more connected than we might ever have believed.”

- 23.** Sometimes the very things that we try to hide from others, or that we imagine to be vulnerabilities or weaknesses, can actually be powerful points of connection and motivating factors that drive us to overcome. “When someone chooses to lift the curtain on a perceived imperfection in her story, on a circumstance or condition that traditionally might be considered to be a weakness, what she’s often actually revealing is the source code for her steadiness and strength.” Think about anything you may have instinctively withheld about yourself with certain people or in certain situations in your life, or still do choose to withhold. How might you reframe these things as part of the source code of your strength?
- 24.** “The strength of one resolute soul can become the strength of many.” Discuss this idea. What does it mean for you? Have you witnessed the power of such “resolute souls” in your life, in your community, in history?
- 25.** When Mrs. Obama discusses our differences, she talks about the importance of stepping forward rather than back, saying more rather than less. Has there been a time in your life when you felt like the “other,” that you had something difficult to share about yourself but felt lifted and unburdened by stepping forward and sharing it?
- 26.** Mrs. Obama also acknowledges that “the work of visibility is difficult, and it’s distributed unevenly. There’s nothing fair about it, in fact. I happen to be well-acquainted with the burdens of representation and the double standards for excellence that steepen the hills so many of us are trying to climb.” Think about a time when you stepped forward when you could have stepped back. How did it make you feel? How might you continue to step forward, whether to advocate for yourself or in support of others who face greater burdens in doing so, within your own community, school, or workplace?

THE ARMOR WE WEAR

“Nobody survives a hero’s journey undefended.”

27. Mrs. Obama describes the various forms of armor that we put on to protect ourselves in certain situations—on the job, in a new relationship, in the classroom. Mrs. Obama writes: “Preparedness is part of the armor I wear. I plan, rehearse, and do my homework ahead of anything that feels remotely like a test. . . . Preparedness becomes a hedge against panic. And panic is what will lead you into disaster.” Why is preparedness such an important part of Mrs. Obama’s armor? What strategies, tools, and behaviors make up the armor you wear?
28. When it comes to armor, the challenge, Mrs. Obama notes, is to “remain tough without being overly guarded, to stay nimble and open to growth, allowing others to see you for who you are. It’s learning how to shelter your flame without hiding its light.” In what areas in your life has your protective armor served you, and in what situations might your armor have backfired and stifled your light?

GOING HIGH

“Progress requires creativity and imagination.
It always has. Ingenuity is born of boldness.”

29. Mrs. Obama first publicly said the words “When they go low, we go high” at the 2016 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia. Has your understanding of what Mrs. Obama means by “going high” changed after reading *The Light We Carry*?
30. Mrs. Obama writes that “going high” is “a reminder to pause and be thoughtful, a call to respond with both your heart and your head. . . . It’s about taking an abstract and usually upsetting feeling and working to convert it into some sort of actionable plan.” Give an example of a time when you have chosen to “go high.” Have there been moments in your life when you chose a different option and “went low” instead? Thinking back now, would you have done anything differently?
31. “Going high” isn’t a motto; it is work—often hard, often tedious, often bruising. Mrs. Obama cites the late civil rights leader John Lewis: “Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest.” Democracy, too, is not a state; it is an act. What are ways we can go high for democracy?
32. As Mrs. Obama established herself as First Lady and grew more comfortable in her role, she started to give herself more permission to be expressive and creative. “My goal was always to do serious work in a joyful way.” Reflect on that idea. Where in your life could you do “serious work in a joyful way”? Are there ways you bring joy into your work already?
33. “Progress requires creativity and imagination,” writes Mrs. Obama, “It always has. Ingenuity is born of boldness. We have to be able to envision what’s possible, summoning it from the unknown—whatever

does not yet exist, the sort of world we hope to live in—in order to even begin to actualize a plan to get there.” What is your vision for the world you hope to live in or to leave for the next generation? Has your idea of what is possible to achieve changed over the course of your lifetime and, if so, how?

- 34.** Reflecting on the various tools and strategies that Mrs. Obama has described throughout *The Light We Carry*—knitting needles and the power of small, starting each day with kindness, filling the seats at your own “Kitchen Table,” practicing decoding fears, showing and spreading your gladness for others—which of these things might you carry forward into your own life? In what ways do you hope these tools and strategies will serve you and help to strengthen your light? How will nourishing your own light help you to overcome uncertainty and make a difference in your community and in the world?