

Barack Obama Mamma

Maria Laurino (June 13, 2008)



Could a majority of Italian-Americans back the African- American presumptive Democratic nominee?

My eighty-six-year-old mother is an enthusiastic supporter of Barack Obama. So is my sixty-two-year-old mentally retarded brother for whom my mother cares. When I call to check in on them daily, my brother Henry excitedly talks about Barack. "Looks like Obama hit a home run today," he tells me. A few months earlier, before the candidate's name was fully saturated into the twenty-four-hour news cycle - on which my mother and my brother are fully hooked -- Henry called the Illinois senator "Rock Obama." Actually, it sounded more like "Rocco Bama," turning the first African-American presumptive nominee of the Democratic Party into someone's Italian uncle.

Go Rocco Bama!



As my brother Henry tells me, "It would be a dream to have the colored guy in the White House."

My mother and my brother are living the dream – and I couldn't be prouder of both of them. My brother, born in 1946, raised in an environment in which blacks were called "coloreds," declares: "I hope and pray, I swear on Grandma and Grandpa -- Rock Obama -- I hope he wins. The way he puts his whole body into it and everything. It's like President Kennedy."

My mother, raised by parents who kept "separate glasses" for my grandfather's black workers, has revealed throughout this primary season her complicated self. After Obama's speech on race, my mother related to the candidate's grandmother, who feared the sight of black men on the street, even as she was lovingly raising a young Barack. The candidate acknowledged this troublesome side of his grandmother's character, yet still declared his deep love for her.

As if Obama personally extended a similar forgiveness to my mother, his articulation of the complexities of race gave my mother the freedom to accept, and the ability to transcend, her cultural limitations. If the candidate's own grandmother had race problems, then so, too, can my mother acknowledge her own.

My maternal grandfather, born in the late 1800s, had his own a complicated relationship with African-Americans. While my grandfather kept separate cups for the black workers he employed in his construction company, he also chose an African-American man to be his medical doctor. My mother acknowledges how unusual her father's decision was in the 1940s, and she also remembers their extremely close relationship. During my grandfather's final hours, as he drifted in and out of consciousness after suffering a heart attack, his doctor sat at his bedside, holding my grandfather's hand. The doctor cried when my grandfather died.

Separate cups for workers; a bedside vigil between a black doctor and his white laborer patient. The two images are testaments to institutional racism and the human potential to transcend it. The images are also testaments to the American ability to move beyond the past with boldness and promise – characteristics that more traditional societies seem incapable of claiming for themselves. (Could an Italian-born man of African heritage become the president of Italy?) The nomination of Barack Obama to lead the Democratic Party to the presidency has been the catalyst to ponder this duality in American life.

I'm proud not only of my octogenarian mother's responsiveness to Obama, but also my family's refusal to shift, as so many Italian-Americans historically have done, from the Democratic to Republican Party. We've always been ardent Democrats, still sipping coffee from the red, white, and blue donkey mugs that I bought as a present for my father decades ago. My father would shake his head at Italian-American neighbors and friends, sons and daughters of push cart vendors, plumbers, and electricians, who broke the historic tie with the working man's party and became Republicans.

Sadly, few other family members, share our beliefs. We try not to talk politics outside our immediate family for fear of hurting feelings. Italian-American families wound easily -- even over the most trivial matters -- and those wounds can last for years. "Remember the provolone," a character in Nancy Savoca's hilarious film *True Love* gravely explains why two women can't be seated together at a wedding. Apparently, their irreparable split was over a piece of odoriferous cheese.

I recognize that my mother's political journey, enabling her not only to support but embrace an African-American man whom she believes is brilliant and compassionate, is no small feat for an eighty-six-year-old Italian-American woman. But will a majority of Italian-Americans feel the same way?

Yes, Henry, it would be a dream if the colored guy got into the White House.

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