

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

ANTHONY PETERSON INTERVIEW  
*OBAMA: IN PURSUIT OF A MORE PERFECT UNION*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Anthony Peterson**  
**Classmate, Punahou School**  
**February 19, 2019**  
**Interviewed by Peter Kunhardt**  
**Total Running Time: 1 hour, 2 minutes and 23 seconds**

START TC: 01:00:00:00

MATT HENDERSON:

Anthony Peterson interview take one, marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Anthony Peterson

Classmate, Punahou School

## **Obama's high school in Hawaii**

01:00:13:03

ANTHONY PETERSON:

Um, Punahou is a private school on a beautiful campus that looks like a college campus. It is actually a kindergarten through twelfth grade school, my only experience there was in the high school. So, we had our own sort of quad, our own area that was the high school area. It really resembles a college campus, and much of what we did there was college prep. And so we had- we had schedules that were like college schedules, our whole

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

experience was meant to mimic and actually, to mimic and prepare us for the college experience. It was a strenuous school. My classmates were– excelled academically, artistically and athletically. I was not at the top of my class, but I held my own there. It was a– it was a– it was also a warm campus. And I say that because I’ve seen some private school campuses since then, and that whole idea of the stress of a private school, or of an academically challenging school, I didn’t feel that stress. I mean, I felt the challenge, but not the stress of it. So, there was this sort of a welcoming community on the campus for me.

## **Punahou School’s philosophy**

01:02:03:00

ANTHONY PETERSON:

You know, I don’t remember exactly what the motto was, but there was this sense of, you’ve been given much, and so much is required of you. The school was founded as a school for missionary’s children, and so that whole missionary idea of serving the world, not conquering the world but serving the world, was still there when I was there even though it’s not a terribly religious school. But that whole sense of mission that you’ve been given much, so you can serve the world with that.

## **Meeting Obama**

01:02:43:06

ANTHONY PETERSON:

My first memory of meeting Barry Obama, and it's been some years now, my best memory is that our mutual friend Rick Smith introduced us, and Rick was fairly new to the school, like I was, he was a year behind me, so he was a junior when I was a senior, and Barry was a freshman at that time. If memory serves, I was having a conversation with Rick, and he said, "well you need to meet this guy, Barry." Because there were only 4 Black students out of 1600 students in the high school that year. I hadn't met Barry yet because he was a freshman and had just come in to the high school, so that's how we met. And the three of us bonded pretty quickly and I say that, we certainly weren't an exclusive group, I spent more of my time with other folks than I did with Barry and Rick, but we did have a standing meeting about once a week for the three of us to get together and talk about life.

### **The 'Ethnic Corner' at Punahou School**

01:04:01:09

ANTHONY PETERSON:

So, we- we called our standing meeting "ethnic corner" and it was tongue-in-cheek. We talked about rapping together, and this was when rapping was not hip-hop, it was just having a conversation. We talked about school, we talked about girls, we talked about world issues, we talked about whether the non-Black girls at our school, which was all the girls at our school, would ever date us. We talked about social issues, because that was important to us, and so one of those questions was will we ever see a Black president in our

lifetime, and after talking through it, our consensus was, there will be a Black president, but it won't be in our lifetime. And of course, none of us was thinking, and it's going to be one of us.

**Speaking about race at Obama's high school**

01:05:00:14

ANTHONY PETERSON:

We did, but especially related to just the social situation. Now, I've read Barack Obama's books, and I've read about some of the agony, racial agony that he felt. That year, if he was feeling it, it wasn't evident. We talked about real issues that were race related issues on our campus, but it wasn't an issue of discrimination or of truly feeling out of place, because we had our circles of friends. So, the agony that I read about later in his- in his high school experience was not something I was aware of at that time, and it wasn't anything I was experiencing for myself either. One of the issues with Rick and Barry and me, is we were used to being in situations where we were the only Black person there, or where we were bridging two cultures. I mean, that was just a part of how each of us had grown up. This was just a chance for us to kind of bond, but not really with- with discrimination on our mind.

01:06:22:01

This is a highly racially diverse school. So, the question of whether Black students were treated differently is hard to answer. There were only 4 of us, and- and we weren't making a big deal about our blackness. That year, there was- I was the only Black student who was not bi-racial. And we hung out in

groups that were not race-based groups, except for this time that we had. So when Barry and I played basketball– pick-up basketball before school in the mornings, we were the only Black guys out there. There were Japanese guys, Filipino guys, white guys. They were just our friends. In terms of faculty and staff, aside from the fact that our numbers were so small that they didn't know if they might say something offensive to us, but I don't think we were treated differently, other than that we're different. Does that make any sense? My hangout was the attendance office, and the attendance secretary was there, the athletic director's secretary was there, and they shared an office. I was the only Black person who hung out in that area, but all students from campus are coming in. If you showed up late, you have to go to the attendance office. So, we're connecting with all kinds of students. There were people who made racial jokes– and you are in high school, so you have to decide, is that a joke, or is that something that's going to offend me, or is it somewhere in between, do I want to make waves? But it was not a hostile environment. At least from my experience, it was not a hostile environment for Black folks.

### **Impressions of Obama**

01:08:33:17

ANTHONY PETERSON:

If you think about who Barack was as a high school student, he was my friend. And as a freshman, when we had these- these conversations with Rick in our ethnic corner, he held his own with a junior and a senior, but I wasn't

thinking in terms of, “boy this guy is really impressive.” I was just– he’s just a friend, and we’re just having these conversations.

**Obama speaking at the 2004 DNC**

01:09:09:10

ANTHONY PETERSON:

Seeing him on the national scene, I was highly impressed with the grown man Barack Obama. And the first time I actually saw him on the national scene was at the Democratic Convention in 2004 when he gave the keynote speech. And so, on the one hand, he echoed those conversations that we had in high school, he talked about many of the things that we talked about in high school. But on the other hand, of course, he’s a grown man now, so he’s not a goofy, high school kid– high school freshman, he’s a grown man, so I was really impressed with how self-possessed he was, how confident he was, and how clearly, he expressed vision for us, even when he was just running for the U.S. Senate. So yes, I became impressed with him as a grown man.

01:10:11:20

ANTHONY PETERSON:

In the 2004 Democratic Convention keynote, a couple of lines stood out for me, and I think I even stood on my feet when he started saying, “This is not a liberal America or a conservative America, it’s the United States of America. It’s not blue states and red states, it’s the United States, we’re not democrats and republicans, we’re the United States of America.” So, there was that whole sort of litany that I thought: audacity, the audacity to do that at the

Democratic Convention. But then there was another line that comes across kind of as a throwaway, and he was talking about how parents need to turn off TV's and encourage education for students, for their children, and he said, "we need to eradicate the slander that says a Black kid with a book is acting white." And that- that echoed right back to the kinds of conversations that Barry and Rick and I used to have, because that was an issue, we had all grown up with as academically minded Black guys. In their cases, they were both biracial, but everyone looks at them and sees Black guys, so as academically minded Black guys, we had heard for years, "You're acting white." I don't know if folks still hear that today, but for him to say that on the national stage in 2004, I just felt like, that's my friend again, and he's expressing those values that I still hold and that he still holds.

### **Obama's grandparents**

01:12:07:17

ANTHONY PETERSON:

So, this is where my age gets to be a problem. I don't remember if I ever met Barry's grandparents. I don't remember if I ever went to their apartment. I think I might have, but- but I can't say for sure that I did. I knew he lived with his white grandparents, he talked about that. I knew his mother was sometimes there and sometimes not. Um, I didn't really probe into those questions, but I knew- I knew who he lived with, I knew generally where he lived because he was a lot closer to campus than I was, and I think I might

have been there once and met his grandparents once, but I don't remember for sure.

**Obama's basketball 'game'**

01:13:00:05

ANTHONY PETERSON:

To talk about Barry as a basketball player, from my experience, I have to start by saying, I'm not a very good basketball player. And I'm playing with him, again I'm a senior, he's a freshman. He was a better basketball player than I was in pick-up ball, but this was pick-up ball. This was not- he later played on the- on the team, on the school team. My understanding is he was like 7<sup>th</sup> man. He probably could have been higher on the roster if he had played according to the coach's plan. If you talk about an overtly Black game, my white grandson plays basketball, and he plays an overtly Black game. He plays in a league that is- that is predominantly Black, that's run by Black folks, and he learns to play that way. We play teams that play a different style, and this was probably the style that the Punahou coach wanted, and it's a lot of passing, a lot of outside shooting, a lot of waiting. And I think Barry wanted to - he did have the outside shot, he definitely had the outside shot, but he wanted to run and gun, and Coach was not having that. Now I have to say I did not experience that, I wasn't there when he was playing on the team, but I can imagine that. Now when we were playing streetball, we're playing pickup ball, it's all whatever you want to do. So, yeah there wasn't a lot of passing.



**Obama's sense of racial identity**

01:14:42:05

ANTHONY PETERSON:

What I like to say is "race is not real, but race does matter." And it's not real because, biologically, it doesn't add up to- to anything significant, there is more variation within what we call races than there is between what we call races. There is no real scientific evidence for any appreciable way that we use the word race the way we use the word race. We can talk about a person's ethnicity, we can talk about the origins of their genealogical origins, those things can matter. There are some biological issues that matter, but they are not- they're not- they don't follow the same lines as we use when we talk about race, race is a social construct. When I think about Barry/Barack Obama, I think about how he had to, and this is--part of this began maybe before or at least in high school, he had to determine what it means to be a Black man in the United States. Because although he is only half Black, and in fact, the half of him that is Black didn't come through that slave experience that many of us did. But what he had to deal with was the fact that anyone who looks at him, anyone who interacts with him, anyone who connects with him, sees a Black man, or a Black boy and then a Black man. And so, he has had to determine what does it mean to be a Black man, and I think there was some trial and error with him. I think playing basketball- playing a Black style of basketball was something he chose to do because he decided, "I'm a Black guy, and so I need to do this." There were parties that I've read about

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

that he went to, I used to go to these parties, I wasn't there when he was there, but I had gone to those parties before, they were, most of them, on our military bases. They were Black parties, um a lot of dancing- it was mainly dancing. He went there, I think, to- to get a sense of okay, is this part of my Blackness?

01:17:08:03

Hawaii is a different place than the mainland. There's all these different places in the mainland, where had he lived in the south, he might have done this a different way, had he lived in the northwest, he might have done this a different way. But in Hawaii, because there were so few Black folks there and most of them were connected to the military and he wasn't, I think that's just the way he chose to go about it. He knows that people see him and see a Black boy, a Black man, but in Hawaii those ethnic issues are always out there. We don't hide our ethnicity in the ways that some other folks do, so he just had to claim some things for himself.

01:18:08:06

And I think even- even later when he graduated from Columbia University and then moved to Chicago, into the inner city I think there was more testing of what does it mean to be a Black man. And he claimed some things for himself. But I think also in the process he claimed the totality of his racial makeup, it wasn't just "I'm a Black man, I'm claiming that, but I also was raised by my white grandch--" I have white grand-children, he has white grand-parents. "I was raised by them and by my mom." Um, and so I think he spent some time defining who he was, and I think when I talk about the

confidence that I saw in 2004 at that Democratic Convention speech, I think that was a man who had- who had claimed who he was for himself.

### **Hanging out with Obama in high school**

01:19:18:21

ANTHONY PETERSON:

Rick and Barry and I got together on the Cook steps, just outside the attendance office and have our ethnic corner. And ... it was, you know, it was fun and serious at the same time. So, I'm hanging out in the attendance office and sometimes Barry would come by at lunch time and say, "Do you want to go to the snack bar?" and I never had money, I brought my lunch. But they did have a great roast beef salad sandwich that I loved, and so he would beg me to walk with him to the snack bar to get this and whatever he wanted, and I never had money, so the end of that conversation was always, "Alright, I'll pay for you." So, it cost him a lot for me to walk with him to the snack bar.

### **Obama's note in Peterson's yearbook**

01:20:23:07

ANTHONY PETERSON:

You know, you never know when people sign your high school yearbook who is going to be signing it. So, you give it to everybody, and I'm the sort of person- I'm a souvenir person, so I have all my yearbooks from middle school through high school, and I did know that at Punahou I was going to school with some people who were going to make a difference in the world. I

didn't know I was going to school with someone who was going to be president. And certainly didn't think Barry Obama would be that person, not because of any level of competence, but because he was going to be a basketball player and I was going to be a lawyer. So, this is what he wrote: "Tony, man, I'm sure glad I got to know you before you left. All those ethnic corner's, trips to the snack bar, and playing ball made the year a lot more enjoyable, even though the snack bar trips cost me a fortune. Anyway, been great knowing you, and I hope we keep in touch. Good luck in everything you do and get that law degree. Someday when I'm an all-pro basketballer and I want to sue for more money, I'll call on you. Barry."

***Dreams from My Father***

01:21:49:13

ANTHONY PETERSON:

I didn't have any contact with Barry post high school, that I can remember. I mean, I probably saw him when I went back to visit campus, but I was in Boulder, Colorado once and found a book that I discovered he had written, which I had no idea he had written a book - "Dreams from My Father" by Barack Obama, who I knew as Barry. And I read that book, and there were several issues that kind of stood out for me. First of all, when he talks about his high school experience, I recognized the pieces of it, I recognized the places he talked about. What I didn't resonate with or didn't know about were what was going on with him internally, so that was -- that was a revelation for me. And I know the names of some of the folks who were in the

book were changed, I know those people. I know some of those people in the real experience, and all of that rang true to me.

01:23:04:17

I was really impressed by his experience post college and going and doing community organizing with churches in Southside Chicago, and actually what that did for him as a person of faith, he became a Christian out of that experience, and that meant something to me. The religious part was only a surprise because I knew him to be an agnostic. When the three of us, when Rick and Barry and I talked, we talked about religion some. I was a Christian, Rick and Barry were- were confessed agnostics. But when I read how this experience happened for Barack in Southside Chicago, where he's doing this community organizing, and these women, these older women in these churches said, "You need to come to our church," and then him hearing messages that resonated with him, and that's how he made this commitment to be a Christian, it sounded like this is how Barry would do it. If it ever happened for him, this is how it would happen for him.

**Reverend Jeremiah Wright**

01:24:29:08

ANTHONY PETERSON:

I did follow the scandal with Jeremiah Wright. It- that was a- I was following the whole campaign. And uh that was a big bump in the campaign. I was- I had some strong feelings about that whole experience, and they began with, I had known the name Jeremiah Wright, I didn't know Barack Obama's

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

connection with it, I knew Jeremiah Wright as a great preacher. As a model of preaching, and not only that, as a great community organizer from a church perspective. The kind of work that his church did in the community was a— was a model for other churches. I knew that there was, you know, that on the surface if you look at what their church was about, there are some places for criticism, but to my mind they weren't really legitimate criticism, it was a misunderstanding of some things. When— when YouTube video of Jeremiah Wright's preaching came out, I watched these clips, and it was clearly— clear that these were clips stitched together out of context. My wife and I spent a weekend researching those clips and finding the entire sermons, and we were floored by the actual messages of each of those sermons, were just the opposite of the message that the clips were creating. When Jeremiah Wright talks about, he said, "We talk about God bless America" and then he looks at the biblical record and says, "God would not bless what we're doing as Americans" and he has a litany of what God would not bless.

01:26:43:17

That was his message. But his dedication to The Bible, his dedication to America was all very clear. He wanted the United States of America to be more than we are. He wanted— he wanted us to live up to what we say that we are. Now, he's a Black preacher of a particular style and he is a provocateur and that was his style. Folks who were sitting there, Black, white, Hispanic, who would sit in Trinity United Church of Christ, know that style of preaching, know how to receive it, know what to do with it, but if you're coming in from the outside and that's not something you are familiar with,

then you're going to misunderstand what's going on there. So, there was that whole element. I also think Dr. Wright did not do himself any favors because, you know, he was just retiring at that time and I think that the uh- I think the notoriety, the infamy got to him. And so, there was a little period right before Senator Obama gave that "A More Perfect Union" speech in Philadelphia, I understand why he felt like he had to make that speech, because there was a period of a week where, in my opinion, Jeremiah Wright did step out of--he wasn't in the pulpit anymore, and he's talking to people who aren't going to understand what he's saying, and he said some things that I wish he hadn't said.

### **Obama's relationships and politics**

01:28:43:04

ANTHONY PETERSON:

You know, I can only give a guess as to why there is a, perhaps, a pattern of Barack Obama cutting off some people from the past. My best guess about that is that it's- that it's politics in the sense that you have to keep moving on. I didn't follow him in Illinois, but I went back and kind of learned some about how he was in Illinois state senate, and he learned the rough and tumble of doing politics. That's why someone as young and, perhaps, somewhat inexperienced as he was could ascend to the presidency, because he had a laboratory in Chicago, Illinois politics where he learned some things. You know, he lost his first senate bid to Bobby Rush and he learned some things there, and I think there was some cutting off that happened then. So, I believe

Barack Obama's message of hope and change, and I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper. I believe he believes that. I believe it as well. I think his vision for America is my vision for America, but one- one reason that Barack Obama got to be Barack Obama, president of the United States, is because that's not all there is to him. He knows how to work those systems, and I think probably the cutting off of people is an unfortunate part of that system.

### **Engaging with Obama's career**

01:30:49:09

ANTHONY PETERSON:

When I saw Barack Obama at the 2004 Convention and heard him speak, my political ears opened up. I started paying attention to what he was doing. He was running for senate at that time. And then in 2006 he gave another speech about religion in politics, and from then on, I started thinking, I hope he runs. That was summer of 2006 and he announced in February of 2007. And he, I'm trying to remember this time frame, he was already a Senator and was campaigning for Harold Ford Jr. in Tennessee. They came to Nashville, and Senator Obama spoke, and then there was a rope line, and I went up there, made sure I had my business card with me, and I looked him in the eyes and gave him my business card and he put it in his pocket, and I was hoping that might be an in for me, but I haven't heard anything since then.

### **Campaigning for Obama in 2008**

01:32:21:15



# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

ANTHONY PETERSON:

I campaigned in 2008 and uh– for him for president, I went knocking on doors, I took my grandson– four-year-old grandson with me knocking on some doors, and I also campaigned online, by that I mean, I started a blog primarily to talk about Barack Obama, and for me the issue was this. I was an evangelical Christian, and I was very impressed with his vision for America, and with my perception of his ability to carry out this vision, but there were some issues as an Evangelical that I had to wrestle with. And remember this was 2008 where all of us were– many of us were culturally on some major culture war issues, like abortion and like gay rights. And the gay rights issue wasn't as big a deal for me, but the abortion issue was. And so, I mention that because I wanted to say to my fellow evangelicals, this guy is worth looking at. There might be some issues here that you don't agree with him, so I want to wrestle with those issues with you. My view on pro-life and pro-choice issues changed in that process of me wrestling with these things. I would say today that I'm pro-life and I'm pro-choice, that is what I would say today. I think it's a false dichotomy that we put there. But, trying to reconcile voting for him with the views that I used to have helped me to think through some things. So I was– so intellectually, and in the blogosphere I was campaigning as well as going door to door and making phone calls and that sort of thing. My wife and I became political junkies because of that whole experience. All of it mattered to us. But it was all because of this vision. It was all because of this is what I think America– this is the America I've always wanted, so let's go for that.

**Election results 2008**

01:35:09:18

ANTHONY PETERSON:

On election night, we were sitting in our living room and my... I was there with my white wife, and I think all four of my white children. And at that time, my four white grandsons, who were like 4 years old through high school. So, this is the scenario, and we're watching the TV. And incidentally, all of those people campaigned- all of those people campaigned for Barack Obama and none of them were politically minded people at all. So, we're watching state by state, and it was just elation. It was just a feeling of elation that whole celebration, but--.

01:36:06:14

ANTHONY PETERSON:

So I'm teaching this adult Sunday school class. It's our church's only adult Sunday school class. I'm the only African American in the church. I'm teaching a bunch of white adults. I asked in this classroom, "Regardless of how you voted, how do you feel about the outcome?" And I knew how my wife felt, I knew there was one other person in the room who was very supportive of Barack Obama. I was not prepared for the anger and vitriol that came from other people in that classroom. But there was one person actually, I'm not going to identify her, but there was one person who said, "I did not vote for him, but I was watching on TV and seeing that Grant Park scenario, and I was watching the African-American people there," and she said, "I was

so struck by how moved they were, by how significant this was for them.” And she said, “So, I didn’t vote for him, but there was something there that matters to me. That this was so significant for them, and I’m hoping he’s going to do something good for America.” And I felt that. But I felt it in a room full of my family, my white family.

**White reaction to Obama’s election**

01:37:44:22

ANTHONY PETERSON:

Whenever you ask a question about whether something is race related, it can easily be dismissed, and it can easily be embraced. What I mean by that is this. When you think about the vitriol that we experienced that Sunday. No one in that room would say that it was race related, they would– no one would admit that it’s race related, but I believed that– One of the reasons I did the campaign I did online is because I knew that if Barack Obama was going to be elected president, he would be doing violence to the image of the United States president that we have had for 200 and some years. And I knew that was a huge hurdle for people to hop over. I think in that classroom, well there were a number of things going on. One is these people believed every negative story they heard about Barack Obama. Why did they believe it? I think partly because well he’s the Democrat, he’s the liberal and we don’t agree with that stuff. But also, he’s exotic, he’s different, he’s not what a president is supposed to look like. They would never say that last part, but I believe that was part of what was going on there. When we talk about, I talk

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

about race issues a good bit. The issue is not that race is always the only thing going on, but it is important to recognize when it is going on, when it is there, when it is present, and it's not always the only factor. I think, you know, some people are going to vote for their party regardless. I think, when it came to Barack Obama, there was another element other than party that came across and I think the level of emotion was because of that. Because they chose to believe that he wanted to leave aborted babies who were born alive, you know, botched abortions, that he would choose to leave them to die. All of these things. He was a Muslim and an atheist at the same time. They believed all of those stories despite the fact, and I didn't tell you this. The Sunday after the 2004 Convention, I actually preached a sermon at my church. I actually introduced my- my church members at my church, I'm not a pastor but I was preaching that Sunday. I introduced them to Barack Obama in 2004, and it had nothing to do with his stance on any issues, it had to do just with that speech, and the idea that he thought he was going to be a basketball player and now he's running for U.S. Senate and never got to be that basketball player, and so I used that as a sermon illustration. So the people in my little predominantly white church knew the name Barack Obama four years before he started running for president, or three years before he started running for president. They knew his name because of me, and yet here we are now the Sunday after election night, and they had believed all this other stuff they hear, even though they heard about him first from me and they heard that he was my friend, so I had a little anger that

they were believing strangers instead of believing me who they know. So that's why I think yeah, perhaps there was race involved in that as well.

**Navigating race**

01:42:05:16

ANTHONY PETERSON:

Barack Obama was elected to be president of the United States, he was also the first Black president of the United States. There are a lot of – and during that campaign– there are a lot of reasons that campaign was successful. One of them was that he set out this vision, another is he is a great speaker. Another is that he's extremely intelligent. Another is that he's worked that political role that he got out of Chicago. And I think there's this– I think the charisma of Barack Obama created a place where people could kind of project whatever they wanted to project on him, even though, and this is one of the things I said I tried to do as I was campaigning for him. I knew there was a whole lot of substance under that charisma, but the charisma largely is what got him elected. But it's also what set other people who didn't like him off. Because he's a superstar, he wasn't just a guy running for president, he was a superstar.

01:43:22:09

And so, there are folks who are on the far left who projected him as a far leftist, they wanted him to be that, there were folks on the right who wanted him to be a leftist, because they wanted to– they painted that picture of him so they could have a reason to reject him. I always saw him as a moderate. I

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

mean, I listened to what he was saying, I read his books, listened to his speeches, I hear how he's drawing ideas from past Republicans. How he's worked with different groups. I heard about when he was president of the Law Review, how he bridged different groups. That's something we had in common. So I saw this person who can bridge these— sort of be a bridge over the culture wars, if I can mix those metaphors. But people saw him as whatever they wanted to see him as, and that's whether they supported him or didn't support him. And so— and then as the- the first Black president, then there's that whole issue of how Black is he going to be? So, some folks think, in his eight years, that he wasn't Black enough. He didn't do enough for the Black community. You even hear that today. You know, Barack Obama was not elected to be president of the Black people, he was elected to be president of the United States, of all people. But there were people who felt like he was not Black enough and there were people who felt like he was too Black. Today— even today, there are people who say he didn't do enough for the Black community in all of his eight years, and there are others who say he talked too much about race, about Black things. So, there's the funerals that he spoke at for like Trayvon Martin, where he said, "If I had a son, he might look like Trayvon Martin," and then he spoke at the funeral for the nine in Charleston, and for a lot of people he was being too Black, he sang "Amazing Grace" at that- at that service.

01:45:58:11

He sang it the way Black folks sing "Amazing Grace". I think- I think he walked that line. He um... There was a book, I don't know if you can use this,

but there was a book by Shelby Steele written during the campaign, and I think it's called *A Bound Man*, and why we love Barack Obama and why he can't win. And what Steele was— Steele was not necessarily saying, "He can't win the election," what he was saying is, "No matter what happens, Barack Obama is going to be criticized from both sides. He can't win. If he talks too much about race, then folks are going to criticize him, if he doesn't talk enough, people are going to criticize him." The thing about Barack Obama is, one he's very bright, two he's been doing this balancing act all of his life. Or at least all of his sort of high school and adult life. And- and there are folks who have lived their own lives, who have their own experiences, who think they would have done things differently. So, there are Black intellectuals who felt like he didn't do enough for the Black community, didn't speak enough about race, didn't speak enough about the oppressiveness— the oppression in our culture, you know various issues. And Barack Obama knows all of those things, he knows all those issues, and he's not necessarily smarter than them, he's just put himself in a position, in a political position where in a way— in a place that fits him. Those folks probably could not be elected president of the United States. Because some of them are prophets, I mean in the way that they operate in the country. They operate out of a prophetic stance. Jeremiah Wright would be an example of that. He operates out of a prophetic stance. We need those folks, but they're not going to be president of the United States. Certainly not the first Black president of the United States. Barack Obama had the temperament, the intellect, the balance in his own experience, and so he could do what some of those other folks probably couldn't do.

**Relationship between the Trump and Obama presidencies**

01:48:45:15

ANTHONY PETERSON:

I think the campaign and election of Barack Obama brought latent racism out. And in the 8 years that he served; we saw more overt forms of racism come up. I didn't think there was enough of that overt racism to warrant- well it didn't keep him from getting re-elected. I was surprised at how; that I believe that was one of the factors in how we got the current president in office. I think the rhetoric that the current president spouted was so much in juxtaposition to the rhetoric of Barack Obama, people latched onto that. That honestly surprised me. The raising of latent racism under Barack Obama at the time didn't surprise me. But I was surprised by how that racism gave us the current president and I would even say, you know, you asked a question about race earlier, I would even say that not just the overt racism, but the more subversive racism, maybe even unconscious racism, got this guy elected. And I say that because of statistics that I've read about particular views on immigration for instance.

**White Evangelicals and politics**

01:51:01:18

White evangelical Christians are the only ethnic religious group that believes that the browning of America is a bad thing. When you look at other ethnic racial groups, that is not the case. And white Evangelical Christians voted for



the current president at a tune of 81 percent. And their support for him hasn't waned much. I am frustrated, I'm angry with folks that I used to worship with, to have turned in this direction, and honestly I think it's a betrayal of the Christian message. I meant that's my perspective. And I can't say for any particular person why they voted how they voted, but it grieves me- it grieves me that 81 percent of white Evangelicals voted in that way, and it matters to me that among non-white Evangelicals, they voted the opposite. So that tells me something, when we talk about- because- because our first thought about that is, well those Black folks and those brown folks voted according to their race. Well if we voted according to our race, if we were shaped by our race and our racial experience, what makes us think that white folks aren't also shaped by their race, and their racial experience?

### **What Peterson would say to Obama now**

01:52:53:03

ANTHONY PETERSON:

First thing I would say to Barry is "good job. And I'm sorry you didn't make it to the NBA." You know, I'm one of those people, like a lot of people, who want to sit down and have a drink with him. But I do, I want to do it to reminisce, and to then say, you know, I would want to joke with him, and say, "How in the world did this happen?" But mainly what I would want to say is, "Thank you for bringing our vision to America, and for displaying it so well for us."

### **Obama's high school dream of becoming an NBA player**

01:53:40:02

ANTHONY PETERSON:

I have some friends who do character education in high schools, and they sometimes have me come out and bring my yearbook, and they tell the story of Barry and Rick and me getting together for our ethnic corner, and most of these kids, these high school kids we're talking about are African American students. And they- and they let the kids read this inscription, not knowing who it came from, and so the question that gets asked is, "Do you think this guy who wrote this became an NBA player?" and they'll say no, because everybody wants to be an NBA player and only a handful of people get there. And then the next question that is asked is, "What do you think happened to this guy?" and the answer usually is, he's either in jail or he's dead. And then my friend will say to them, "Well he's not in jail and he's not dead, and he's not an NBA player. As you know, there's only a handful of people who get to be an NBA player. But he has a job that only one person does." And then there's the big reveal of what he is, and then everybody wants it, you know they want to touch that yearbook.

### **Talking about race**

01:55:21:21

ANTHONY PETERSON:

You know, I taught a class once with- at a church. I was a guest teacher, and this is a wealthy old, and when I say old, 200-year-old congregation, and the class I was teaching was mostly older people, older white people, older

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

wealthy white people. They invited me to come for 4 weeks to talk about race. And in fact, it was right after the Charleston massacre, so we talked some about that. And one of the things I invited them to do was an exercise that I borrowed from Michael Emerson, who teaches sociology. And Emerson has his students go home one day or one week and try an experiment. What he has them do is whenever you tell a story about someone in your life, and it's a white person in your life, say white person. So, my white wife, my white child, my white friend. And then, you need to write a 2-page paper about what that experience was like. So, he gives this assignment to all of his students regardless of their ethnicity, and he says, "Now I know this is going to be uncomfortable for some of you, so if you choose not to do it, then you have to write a paper about why you chose not to do it." So, they come back and inevitably the process is the same. He asks people who did it and who didn't do it. And the only people who chose not to do it, who choose not to do it, are white folks. The people of color always choose to do it. Some of the white folks do, too. What he finds out is that the people of color are used to talking this way about anyone. Some of my friends laugh at me because I almost always identify someone by their race, that is not real but that does matter. Sometimes it is just to paint the picture, and sometimes it is because it is relevant. But many of us, including, I know I'm talking kind of in circles, including these people in this Sunday school class, these older white folks, have been taught all of their lives not to talk about race. Not to— So, there was the woman who invited me to the class, and she's trying to tell us a story from her experience, and she's identifying this woman, and she cannot bring

herself to say she was a Black woman, she was an African American, because she'd been taught all her life not to identify those things.

01:58:35:02

I think it's important as we go forward becoming even more and more ethnically diverse, I think it's important to pay attention to issues of race and ethnicity. Jennifer Harvey wrote a book called *Raising White Kids*. And she is a white woman, and she is also I think a sociology professor. And her issue is, she tries to encourage parents of white children to name race early and often, so that her children don't grow up being surprised by racial issues. So when we think about those big incidents like Charleston, or Charlottesville, or Ferguson, or the election of the last two presidents, and racial issues come out, and we've taught our kids to be color blind, but all of a sudden now everyone's talking about something racial and we don't know how to talk about it. Our kids don't, but also adults don't know how to talk about these things, and we need to. It needs to be a part of our everyday life, not to make life more difficult, but to make life more real, to make it more authentic. To hear from— I heard this expression the other day, “cultural humility”, which is a new idea to me. The idea that when I interact with you, yeah, I'm coming from my perspective, but your perspective matters to me, and my perspective is not the prevailing one.

02:00:39:07

People of color often know that; some white folks don't know that. Their assumption is we're the default, we're the normal. We're the normal. My seven-year-old granddaughter saw that Jennifer Harvey book a couple weeks

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

ago, I was preparing for a talk, and she saw that book and said to me, she said, "Peepaw, some people have funny names for books." and I said, "What do you mean?" and she said, "Like this book right here, it's called 'Raising White Kids' I think that's a funny name." And she is a blonde, white granddaughter. And I said to her, "Do you know why that book was written?" and she said, "No, I don't." and I said, "Well, there are some white people who see their own lives as normal, and everyone else's life as different." And I said, "Now, you're not one of those people, because you have a white grandfather- a Black grandfather," she also has a white grandfather, "you have a Black grandfather, you go to school with people who are mostly brown and there aren't many other white people like you, so you can see yourself as normal and as different. And you can see your friends, your friends can see themselves as normal, and as different." And I said, "But there are some white people who see their own lives as normal, and see everyone else as different," and I said, "That's why we need a book like this."

END TC: 02:02:23:18