

00:00:00 Michele Norris: We are all, every single one of us, no matter where you live, no matter your station, no matter your skin color, no matter your age, we are all writing our futures in pencil.

Michelle Obama: Yeah. This is a moment.

00:00:15 MUSIC

00:00:35 BREAK 00:01:00

00:01:02 Michelle Obama: Hello everybody, I'm Michelle Obama, and this is The Michelle Obama Podcast. On this episode, we will be discussing our relationship with ourselves. We've all been dealing with a lot of change lately. From the outrage and despair... the protests seeking racial justice... to this historic and life-altering pandemic, all of which has upended so much of life as we've always understood it. This change can be a lot. And it can feel heavy.

And the thing is: We're left to deal with this stuff at a moment when we're forced to spend more time alone — more time in our own heads — than we're used to. Dealing with all of this change we're experiencing isn't always easy. And it is not always comfortable. But what I've learned is that this kind of solitude can be revealing. Almost healing.

00:02:07 I couldn't think of anyone better to discuss all of this with than my dear, dear friend and confidante, Michele Norris. Now, you might recognize Michele's voice — she is a decorated journalist, and for years, she has anchored "All Things Considered" on NPR. One of the things I love most about Michele is her ability to listen.

00:02:32 Michelle Obama: How have you been, handling it, I mean, how, how are you, in, COVID quarantine times? How are you managing?

Michele Norris: I'm, I'm doing OK, you know, I wake up every day and count my blessings, our family is together. You know, and they're healthy. Thank goodness. I tried to establish routines for everybody, and then I realized that my children are now adults, and they need to establish their own routines. And, for them, you asked me about me, but I'll talk about them first. Their different personalities emerged. So, one of my children, is like a vampire. And, is up all night, and, I don't know if that's because the rhythm has changed, or because the house, they can have the house to themselves, at night, and the refrigerator, to themselves, and no one is saying,

Michelle Obama: Without your prying eyes!

00:03:31 Michele Norris: Do you really want another bowl of lucky charms? [laughs] You know.

Michelle Obama: Without mama critiques.

Michele Norris: Right, so,

Michelle Obama: Are you just now coming out of your room? Did you shower? [laughs]

Michele Norris: Have you eaten anything, today? So, one of them literally is, is like a night crawler. You know, up all night, and then sleeps all day, and and emerges, kind of in time for dinner? My other child, is a planner. And makes lists, and, does everything, but is doing it all like, from the bed. You know?

Michelle Obama: Right, [laughs], so it doesn't feel, very, uh, productive,

Michele Norris: So it gets done, but it's, you know, so, you know, showers, do or don't happen, and, but the thing that I was able to use to organize the house is, meal time. So we don't eat at a specific time, and we probably should, that would help, but we do eat together everyday. Breakfast is kind of fuzzy, cause not everybody's up, and I had first started to lay out breakfast, like, here's your breakfast buffet, and then

00:04:33 Michelle Obama: Like a bed and breakfast, yeah? Really girl? Mm hmm.

Michele Norris: And that was stupid, that was, I don't know what I was doing.

Michelle Obama: You still don't want 'em to be that comfortable.

Michele Norris: No, I was putting out yogurt cups, and everything you know, and then I had

Michelle Obama: Man, I should've come to your house!

Michele Norris: You should have. I felt like I lost control of a lot of things, but I had control of my kitchen.

Michelle Obama: Mm. For Barack and I, we, we've lived outside of the norm of regular life for quite some time, and what we learned early on in the White House is that in order to stay sane, and to feel like the human that you once were, is that you have to have a schedule, and a routine, that's pretty, that's pretty lock step. So we were in the habit of, you know, I get up, you know, I don't have to set my alarm, but I

Michele Norris: Do you get up at the same time?

00:05:17 Michelle Obama: Uh, roughly, around the same time. I mean, but my sleep is off, too, and I've heard this from a lot of people, it's, you know, because we're not moving around as much. So I'm not as tired, I'm not, I'm not knocked out tired, like I usually am at nine o'clock, I'm going to bed a little bit later, so, and I'm waking up in the middle of the night, cause I'm worrying about something, or there's a heaviness. But, if I sort of set aside, an uneven night, I do tend to wake up at the same time. Not the crack of dawn, but, pretty much like six, seven o'clock, then I try to make sure I get a workout in, although, there have been periods throughout this quarantine, where I just, have felt too low. You know, I've gone through those emotional highs and lows that I think everybody feels, where you just don't feel yourself, and sometimes I've, there've been, uh, a week or so where I had to surrender to that, and not be so hard on myself. 00:06:15 And say, you know what, you're just not feeling that treadmill right now, um, but.

Michele Norris: That's unusual for you.

Michelle Obama: It is unusual, and it is, you know, it's a direct result of just being out of, out of body, out of mind. And spiritually, these are not, they are not fulfilling times, spiritually. You know, um, so I, I know that I am dealing with some form of low-grade depression. Not just because of the quarantine, but because of the racial strife, and just seeing this administration, watching the hypocrisy of it, day in and day out, is dispiriting.

00:06:56 Michelle Obama: So I have had to kind of give myself that, those days, those moments, but for the most part, staying in a routine, getting a workout in, trying to get outside. Um, but schedule has been key, and having a regular dinner time. And, I'm finding that in quarantine, we look forward to that. Because we, in our house, what we all do is go off into our little workspaces, right. Barack's in his office, making calls, working on his book. I'm in my room, the girls are on their computers, and sometimes we're outside if the weather permits, but we've developed this routine, of you know, we don't really worry about seeing one another in the day. But right around five o'clock, everybody comes out of their nooks, and, we like, do an activity, like, puzzles have become big, just just sitting and doing these thousand piece puzzles. 00:07:51 The girls are just like into 'em, and we're all sitting on the floor, around a table where the puzzle is now permanently set up. And then we sit down for dinner. And we talk some more. And then afterwards, the girls and Barack, and, another friend there, they've got a spades tournament. So Barack has taught the girls spades, so now there's this vicious competition. They wouldn't have sat down, but for this quarantine, to learn how to play a card game with their dad. They wouldn't,

Michele Norris: And master it.

Michelle Obama: And master it.

Michele Norris: You know, we don't need as much.

Michelle Obama: Yeah, oh, and the beauty,

Michele Norris: We don't need as much of anything.

Michelle Obama: Not to put anybody out of work, but this time has taught me how to do my own waxing, do my nails,

Michele Norris: You're waxing? You're waxing!

Michelle Obama: I did!

Michele Norris: I am impressed!

Michelle Obama: I did, but it's like, there's a lot of stuff, I'm figuring out, if I want it done, I gotta figure out how to do it, but that's how we were raised, right.

00:08:45 Michele Norris: Right,

Michelle Obama: You know, nobody was going to the nail- my mother never went to the nail salon!

Michele Norris: Oh a nail salon? A nail- there was, I, I don't think I even saw a nail salon,

Michelle Obama: You'd better learn how to do your own nails! I, and not until I was a lawyer, I tell my girls that. It's like, I never went, and got a manicure until I was a lawyer in a big firm, making money.

Michele Norris: And I remember, many of the beauticians worked in, there was that phrase, kitchen beautician?

Michelle Obama: Oh, god yeah, my first, hair dresser, she had her uh, Mrs., was it Mrs. Stewart? Across the alley. Pressed my hair. In her basement.

Michele Norris: Just when you said pressed my hair, chhhhhhhh

Michelle Obama: Press it, press it, burned my, tips of my ears, like ugh! Better sit still. But, you know,

Michele Norris: And it didn't, and it wasn't, before there was that little, little cylindrical thing that the hot comb went in?

Michelle Obama: The heater thing, whatever it's called. The stopper.

Michele Norris: They just put in on the, stove.

Michelle Obama: The stove! On the fire.

00:09:38 Michelle Obama: But, you know, there's a beauty in being reminded of our own self-sufficiency, during this time, you know, in that way I understand people who want to be out in the wilderness, you know, eating what they kill. Building the, I, I appreciate that, because when things fall apart, if you don't have the skills and tools to figure out how to just do some of this stuff on your own, you can be lost, you know, so I understand that American independence, that quest for, you know, I can do this on my own. There's, I respect that.

00:10:15 Michele Norris: Have you found that, for the girls, that, this has been, a recalibration? Where they've discovered that sometimes it's OK to just be?

Michelle Obama: I, yes.

Michele Norris: Like they're not running all the time?

Michelle Obama: I, yes, yes. It's an unburdening, for them. You know, I don't know if they've articulated it. But, there is a calm in them. It's almost like, they needed the world to stop a little bit. You know they didn't realize that they were, that the world they were on, and the way they were living it, was so treadmill-like. So fast and furious. Um, because it was all they ever knew. You know, this generation of, the internet, and social media, and constant instagram, and posting, and knowing too much and having access to too much information, and at this stage, worrying about who you want to be, and where you want to go, and did I get in? And taking the test, and what's the internships, it is just, it has just been relentless.

00:11:14 Michelle Obama: The world was a lot slower when we were growing up.

Michele Norris: You know it's interesting, cause, we did have television, we had, periodicals that came to the house, you know, magazines, catalogues,

Michelle Obama: Highlight.

Michele Norris: Yes. Oh my goodness, yes! And we had this magazine called Ranger Rick.

Michelle Obama: Oh that sounds like some Minnesota stuff.

Michele Norris: Oh it was some Minnesota stuff, yeah. It was, it was totally some Minnesota stuff, and you know, let's go looking for slugs! That was, you know,

Michelle Obama: That's right, but we would look forward to that, that would come like one a month, and they'd give you activities, and things you could do. That, that was big time.

Michele Norris: Yeah! Oh yeah. And we, I'd dine out on that for the whole month.

Michelle Obama: That was like a new Netflix show.

Michele Norris: You know, it would last for the whole, months, and we had a, we had a subscription to National Geographic, which was a big deal for my parents. We were never allowed to touch it after we ate, no greasy fingers, on the National Geographic. And you know when you made collages?

00:12:12 Michelle Obama: Mm hmm.

Michele Norris: And you would cut up, you could not,

Michelle Obama: Use the National Geographic.

Michele Norris: Cut up the National Geographic. And my father, got one of those magazine holders, so they were all like, displayed,

Michelle Obama: Oh you all were fancy!

Michele Norris: January, February, March, in order, was his thing. And then year by year by year by year.

00:12:26 Michele Norris: But it was interesting 'cause when we were growing up, that was how we understood the world. And there was a sense of preparing us to go out, into that world that was so different from the little cocoon that we were growing up in.

Michelle Obama: We were slowly spoon-fed into the world. If we were lucky, and there was time for it, right. I, I grew up with kids who had never, never got the opportunity to see Lake Michigan. Because they lived,

Michele Norris: Even though it was so close.

Michelle Obama: Even though it was so close. There were kids, and I talked about this as First Lady, when we, when I've gone to museums, and openings, and things like that, and the thing I think about are all the kids who don't get to see these places because they don't feel welcome,

because in many ways, they have felt quarantined, to their little worlds, to their communities, because there's a fear of going out, there's a fear of trying something different, there's a fear of the unknown. 00:13:25 So when you don't feel welcome and you don't feel safe, and you don't feel secure in your space, then you, then you don't explore. You don't investigate. If you don't feel comfortable going downtown, Chicago, how do you feel comfortable thinking about the world in the National Geographic book, that you guys saw?

Michele Norris: You know, I, I think about this a lot. Because there are, you know I left Minnesota, I love Minnesota, but I, I knew that I was gonna leave Minnesota. At a, I mean at a really early age, I knew that, as much as I loved my people, and, and the Land of Lakes, I knew that I was gonna go someplace else. And I wonder, maybe it was the National Geographic magazines. Was it something that my parents instilled in me? Because there were a lot of people that I grew up with, who didn't leave, and who barely leave the Southside of Minneapolis. And, and I wonder how much of it was told to us overtly or was just the messaging. 00:14:26 Because as young Black kids, getting ready to go out into a world that was not really fully ready accept us, our parents had to do some sort of jiu jitsu messaging around that, right, because they were trying to encourage us to be bold, to go out into the world, but at the same time, they were terrified about what would happen if we did.

Michelle Obama: Mm hmm.

Michele Norris: And so how do you, how do you give your kid wings, in that situation, and I think about that.

Michelle Obama: Well I, I think that's the miracle of our, our parents' generation of parenting, especially in minority, working class Black communities. So I remember my grandfather, right, my, his mother, was so afraid for him. You know, so that kept him locked down. That, that kept his aspirations small. Because there were real risks in trying to, to operate outside of what you knew. 00:15:24 My mother, kind of understood, that that's what held her father back. And so, while she still carried those fears, that, that fear of trying, of moving beyond what you know, still exists in her generation. She was very, very clear and deliberate about not passing that fear onto us. Cause like you, I always saw a bigger place for myself. But that came not just from the messages from my dinner table, but it came from those moments of dreaming, of daydreaming, of sitting alone and quiet and thinking about myself, my stories, making things up in my head, right. It's that quiet time that gave me the space to think about the life I wanted to build for myself, even at five, and ten, and eleven, and twelve, right.

Michele Norris: We also were, kids in the nineteen seventies. And so our cultural diet, provided us images, and things that our, our parents didn't see. 00:16:28 I mean, they didn't grow up watching television. Soul Train. Actually, you got to watch soul train.

Michelle Obama: Right, [laughs]

Michele Norris: I grew up in Minnesota, where we didn't have Soul Train.

Michelle Obama: You all didn't have Soul Train? What did you do on Saturday at eleven, from eleven to noon, girl?

Michele Norris: No, we had, [laughs], and it's amazing, and it's amazing that so much amazing music has come out of --

Michelle Obama: Aw, I feel so bad,

Michele Norris: I know I feel bad for me!

Michelle Obama: Really, you mean Prince didn't have access to Soul Train?

Michele Norris: Yeah, he didn't have Soul Train!

00:16:55 Michele Norris: So, when I would go visit my, my father's family is from Alabama,

Michelle Obama: Your city cousins!

Michele Norris: And then, and all his brothers one by one moved to Chicago. We would get to Chicago, and the, I was more excited about, more than Wimpy Burgers, and more than going downtown, more than, remember Wimpy Burgers?

Michelle Obama: Yeah, I do!

Michele Norris: More than Harold's fried chicken. More than anything, I wanted to be able to watch,

Michelle Obama: Watch Soul Train. Aw, man.

00:17:20 Michelle Obama: You know, you're right, we had all these cultural experiences that we shared that helped shape our view of the world, but they were also limitations, right. Because, you think of, you know you have seven channels, and a handful of TV shows that everybody's watching, and, so, what is the, that, that meant that every depiction of Blackness came from like three shows, right. It was, you were either, the, the Evans family on Good Times, living in Cabrini Green, with Dynamite, right.

Michele Norris: Right, and good times, ain't we lucky to have them. As tough as things are.

Michelle Obama: Right, or you were George Jefferson, you know, moving on up. You know. And,

Michele Norris: Or you were Julia.

Michelle Obama: Or you were, I loved Julia!

Michele Norris: I loved Julia too!

00:18:05 Michelle Obama: Julia just seemed to be like a calm. She was beautiful and smart and independent, and, wise. But all of those shows, and all of those characters meant so much, because it would be the only depiction, and I, remember my father being so upset, he hated Good Times. Because he hated JJ Walker as the only characterization of Black people. He felt like, that, he was too much of a character, and we loved that show. It's a wonderful show. But that's how, um, important. That's how impactful TV images were on the culture. And particularly for Black people, because that was all anybody ever saw of us.



00:18:53 Anna Holmes: The Michelle Obama podcast continues after the break.

00:19:03 BREAK 00:19:33

00:19:38 Michele Norris: There's kind of a new COVID vocabulary, isn't it. There are also words that, have always had some meaning, but that take on different meaning now. The word hero.

Michelle Obama: Yeah.

Michele Norris: Um, the word essential.

Michelle Obama: Oh yes. Yeah.

Michele Norris: You know, because we think, I think we will forever think about the word 'essential' in a different way. And, when we were told to stay home, they got up, got dressed, and went out into the world, risking their lives, to, drive garbage trucks, to work in warehouses, to work in grocery stores, to work in hospitals. Often doing invisible, but yes, essential work, and I struggle with it because I'm not sure, that, we treat them like they're essential.

Michelle Obama: And that's something that we need to, that's a part of that reflection, that we need to do. You know. With ourselves, and, and as a community. And we have to think about that, in terms of, how uh, wealth is distributed. You know, how, how these essential people are supported. And what does that mean? A lot of these people are, broke. They don't have health insurance. That it, if they were to get sick, as essential as they are, we have not, as a society, deemed it essential to make sure that they can go to the doctor and get the care that they need. And even if they can get COVID care, even if they can get tested, to keep working and doing our stuff, after the effects of the virus have worn off, and they are dealing with some lung issue, or some breathing issue, or asthma, that they don't have to wait, in a, an emergency room, for hours on end, and then worry, that they can even, afford the prescription medication that they need to survive, I mean we have to think about this. We have to think about the people who are not from this country, who are essential workers. 00:21:38 A lot of those folks are still out in the fields picking our corn, and making sure that that food is in our grocery stores, and working in these meat packing plants, to ensure that the, that the cow that was slaughtered, gets into our bellies.

Michele Norris: In a safe, and efficient manner,

Michelle Obama: In a safe and efficient way.

00:21:57 Michelle Obama: We gotta stop and think about, who is dying from this disease and who, and who will have trouble recovering. You know what has been one of many frustrating things to watch, in this pandemic, is people who aren't willing to make the sacrifice of even wearing a mask. [laughs] You know, to, uh, stay at home, uh, because, they don't see the virus, it didn't impact them, they're tired of being at home, there's almost like there's a limit to our sacrifice, and it was eh, about a month. Right. And then we just got tired. Of the virus. That's



been disheartening to see so many people, who, you know, have grown tired of staying at home, [laughs] because the virus didn't impact them.

00:22:55 Michele Norris: Yeah. It's it's the us and them pandemic. It affected, those people, and hasn't really affected me,

Michelle Obama: So why should I have to, not get my haircut. You know. Why can't I go to a restaurant. Um. You know, everything is fine here. But, here we are, uh, watching this virus continue to spread, it has behaved in the way that all the scientists have predicted. That, staying at home, can only flatten the curve if we continue to remain vigilant, and it's not enough if one city does it, and the neighboring town doesn't, because the virus doesn't know boundaries, it doesn't know parts of the country. Or even parts of the world. So having one state enact, stay at home orders, while another state, is, uh, gradually reopening, while another state isn't, employing any precautions, uh, has led us to this stage where we don't know, when the virus will be curved.

00:23:59 Michelle Obama: And it's not enough to just acknowledge that the pain exists, to acknowledge the struggle, we actually have power we can, we can change so much of what we do, we can, sacrifice a little more, we can, we can shift priorities, uh, and not just in our own lives, cause it's not enough, to just do it in your own life if you're not willing to do it in our broader policy. You know, if that, if that, if those conversations aren't gonna happen, then we're just giving lip service to it. You know.

Michele Norris: The great pause needs to become the great recalibration.

00:24:37 Michelle Obama: We've seen these times in our history before, not just like this, but, but, but when things are good, it's easy to forget about that. To take it for granted. To start thinking, yeah, how much, do I really want my taxes going to that, and school lunches? Eh. You know, that's a lot of money. What does it matter, let's cut this, let's chop that. But, all of that came, all the things that we look to cut, were put in place in response to some crisis. That revealed to us, that hey there are a lot of hungry kids, at home, because their parents are poor, so what's the best way to feed them, we're gonna provide them with nutrition, at school. So, we, we have it, in our country's DNA to step up, but we can't forget,

Michele Norris: But we shouldn't assume that we will.

00:25:30 Michelle Obama: We should, we cannot assume that we will. It took great leadership to rally the country, to, to setup regulations during the time of the Great Depression to make sure that banks wouldn't go under. I mean,

Michele Norris: And with great opposition.

Michelle Obama: Always with great opposition, because you're asking people to sacrifice, to give up, things that, that they think they deserve. That they're entitled to. For the sake of the greater good.

Michele Norris: We are all going through a significant period of evolution, and it means, that there's an opportunity in that, it feels burdensome right now, because so much has been taken from us. But there's such an incredible opportunity, to decide how you want to show up in the new world. Because it will be a new world. And my greatest hope is that we don't reach for normal, that we reach for better.

Michelle Obama: Oooh. [snaps] Snaps. Love that.

Michele Norris: Yeah. Don't reach for normal, reach for better.

Michelle Obama: Don't reach for normal, reach for better.

00:26:31 Michele Norris: In this moment, of tumult and uncertainty, a lot of people, are feeling the highs and the lows.

Michelle Obama: Mm hmm. They've been real for me, and, you know I don't think I'm unusual, in that, but, I'd be remiss to say that part of this depression, is also a result of, what we're seeing in terms of, the protests, the continued racial unrest, that has plagued this country, since its birth. I have to say, that waking up to the news, waking up to how this administration has or has not responded, waking up to, yet another, story of a Black man or a Black person somehow being dehumanized, or hurt or killed, or, falsely accused of something, it is exhausting. And, and it, it has led to a weight, that I haven't felt in my life, in, in a while.

00:27:31 Michele Norris: You know I spend a lot of my time thinking about race and identity and studying race and identity and that aspect of my work has been roiling. You know. And it, it started really with the pandemic and the racial disparities that were apparent almost immediately. In who was getting sick and who had access to testing, and then who was dying. But there is, there's been this period, where it's been a ratatat. Of death, that just doesn't even make sense. The killing of Ahmaud Arbery. Immediately followed, by Breonna Taylor and then, the killing of George Floyd in, in a manner that just didn't, just doesn't, I mean, I'm trying to find the right words to describe how much it hurt to watch that video, and I made myself watch that video. You know literally squeezing the life out of someone. I feel like it's almost, it creates a certain sense of vertigo, I think for us because we were told it was supposed to be better.

Michelle Obama: Mm hmm.

00:28:38 Michele Norris: We believed that we had made progress. And we have. You are a manifestation of that. But on some level, our feet are still in the cement. On some level, this country still has not dealt with some very basic hard truths. About, who matters.

Michelle Obama: We knew it was there. Right. We, we saw it right. I think, for me I had hoped that those were just, the last vestiges of it, and maybe it is, cause we don't know what the future holds. But we've just been given just enough, to be lulled into thinking that maybe it's gone. But there were signs. You know, the, fact that we have prisons full of Black men.

Michele Norris: Mm hmm.

00:29:27 Michelle Obama: The fact that a kid, with a small possession of drugs can be sent to prison for most of his life. We, see it in the, continued economic disparity. We saw it in the fight for the Affordable Care Act. I mean, the, the notion that we live in a country where, uh, all people don't have access to quality healthcare, and yes, there are disparities for sure, we, we lived those disparities. I worked in a hospital, I saw our, emergency room filled with people, coming in, with preventable illnesses. Like asthma, and other diseases that with proper preventative care, they would be healthy, and living a, a great life. We, we saw it there, we saw it in, just how adamant um, Mitch McConnell was, to, and how he treated the first Black President. You know the reaction to it. On all sides. The, the the vast discomfort. 00:30:28 With the notion that a Black man could be sitting in the highest level of office, we saw that, we saw the signs, we saw the, the nooses, we heard, the, you know, but we had also hoped that, well, there we some people who elected him. You know, there are some people who voted for that Black man, there, you know things have changed. So, there were signs. There were, there were signs. That still doesn't take away the, the hurt and the pain that comes with realizing, that the people that we, so many of the people we share this planet with, the people that we worked for, whose floors we've cleaned, whose fields of cotton we picked. Who we've tried to live next door to, and raise our children with. The people we serve on boards with, with and sit in classrooms and got degrees with, 00:31:25 That they still don't see us as human. What does it take? How did we get here? How are we still here? And how are people OK with it? And that hurts.

Michele Norris: That was what was, so soul crushing. About the, video that showed the George Floyd death. Because, you know, it, he sat on him like a ranch hand sits on an animal, I mean it was, it was just, it was awful. It was beyond awful.

00:31:59 Michelle Obama: It takes you back to those pictures of folks standing around, lynched bodies in trees. Eating a hot dog, and, it's the same feeling, and I wonder, is that, the intent? Is that really the intent? Is that how, you know, our neighbors want us, want us to feel? And we, we talk about fear, right, you know, we talk about white women clutching their purses at the sight of us, or feeling uncomfortable when we walk in the store, but, I wonder, do you know how, how afraid, we are?

Michele Norris: How much fear we live with! All the time!

00:32:34 Michelle Obama: Every day? Because we know that there are white folks who see us as not human. And have been told stories about us, that are, not true. That have no bearing on who we are, as hardworking, decent citizens, to know, so, yeah that's gonna create some kind of feeling. When you, you have to look at some, your neighbor, and say is that what you think? Is is that how you see me, or my brother or, my my cousin, or my is that what you think of us? Is, is this where you want us to go, as a country? And I think we have to have those conversations. Among, not just among ourselves, but, with our neighbors and our colleagues, and I'm at a point in time where I need some clarity. About well, what do you mean? Now, what do you really mean? What do you really want, what is really your vision? For this country? That we all invested in, all of us. 00:33:37 All of our blood sweat and tears, I know, my, my great great grandmother's, blood is in the soil of this country. I know, my grandfather and, those wore the uniform and fought in wars on behalf of this country. I, I know that I've tried to do my part, getting a good education, and serving as First Lady, and trying to do it with a level of

dignity, and, uh representing every American. Um, sometimes at the expense of our own community who felt like we were a little bit too accommodating, to people who were not Black. We weren't Black enough. [laughs] So you're saying we don't have a stake in this country? That, that we don't belong? Well, then whose country is this?

00:34:23 Michele Norris: And I think that that people are, you know react in a way that's, that, that suggests that, they're tired. Of these old rules. I mean the, never in my life, would I have thought, that Minneapolis, the Southside of Minneapolis,

Michelle Obama: That's your hometown,

Michele Norris: Ten blocks from where I grew up, and the corner of 38th and Chicago, that that would be the epicenter for a wave of protests that would sweep around the globe. That would lead to the removal of monuments and statues, and lead to a moment of reckoning, and recognition, almost said reconciliation, cause I don't think we're there, reconciliation,

Michelle Obama: No, we're not there yet.

Michele Norris: So reckoning and recognition in this country, um, of a number of things that we weren't clear about just a few weeks ago. I mean people now are, embracing the notion that Black lives matter. All kinds of people, it's on city streets. Not far away from here. It's on, sports uniforms, we weren't clear on that just a few weeks ago. 00:35:22 You know the retort was, well, don't all lives matter? Now I think we've established that, the importance of saying Black lives matter. The importance of, talking about, racial equity, and, the disproportionate, distribution of opportunity and education and so many things. But I wonder how, if you think that that will last.

00:35:43 Michelle Obama: We, we don't,

Michele Norris: What do you need to do to make sure that it's not just a passing, moment.

Michelle Obama: Yeah, I don't know. I am uh, heartened, by, the depth, the sustained, vigor, the diversity, the peaceful nature of these protests. That is, that helps me sleep at night, that, that reminds me of the truth. You know, that, no matter how, I feel or what my lull is, that we are making progress. There is that truth. And Barack and I talk about it all the time, that, this is a generation that is not used to the way things were, because, we raised them differently. And we meaning, every, parent, Black, brown, white, rich, poor, we instilled in this generation a different sense of, fairness. 00:36:33 And justice. Right. Because all these kids wouldn't be out, on the, in the streets, if they weren't hearing something, that made the sight of these killings or the knowledge of these killings, intolerable to them. Where they are taking to the streets, at the expense of their health in the middle of a pandemic. That is powerful, and that is a good thing, that show, that shows our growth. The sustainability piece, it's the next and most important question. Because uh, we are in a pandemic. And as we discussed earlier, this has put us in a position where we, we have time on our hands, where we can't, look away, where we can't go back to business as usual, where we can't go squirrel! Right, and, you know, there are no playoffs,

00:37:19 Michele Norris: It's the next shiny object

Michelle Obama: Exactly, what's the next shiny object? Um, we are forced to stare hard, and cold, and fast on the truth of where we are in this country. Uh, and we've had time to parse it, apart in our own souls, and to discuss it at our dinner tables, in a way that makes it hard to get back to business as usual.

00:37:45 Michelle Obama: But when that happens, when the light, gets shone back on real life, um, will we go back to business as usual? I hope not. But it takes longer than months, I think that's the, message to a lot of these young people out here, you know, um, it's gonna take years. Of this kind of engagement. But these young people haven't yet had the experience of that kind of sustainability. Because they have lived in an instant world, instant fame, instant wealth, this will be their lesson in sustainability. And we will also see, come November, when, the real work of change happens, and it can only happen, at the ballot box. In a democracy. Revolution rarely works. Right. In the history of the world, I think history shows us, that, that's not the best bet. 00:38:41 The best bet, is a democracy, with active engaged citizens, voting, in leaders who are accountable. History has shown us that in countries where there have been democracies like that, that's where change is lasting. So November will be, a, another milestone of reckoning, on whether we're ready for this, for the long haul, and you know, I'm doing my part, um, all of us, so many of us are doing our parts to just drive home the point that, do not listen to this propaganda, about your vote not counting, that people are, saying with clear intent on trying to suppress the vote.

00:39:21 Michele Norris: And we need to make sure that the energy, the incredible energy that you've seen on the streets, in so many places, and not just in big cities, in small towns, that that translates, to civic action.

Michelle Obama: Yes. The hardest work that you can do, is to confront the racism and equality in your own life. And that I think, my feeling is, a lot of people have hesitated, to have some of those hard conversations. And to reconcile the inconsistencies in their beliefs, and in some of the worlds they inhabit. It is hard, if you were sitting, at a board room, to notice, that everybody around that table is the same, and it's very hard to make the decision, to either add more, uh, chairs to that table, to diversify it, or to get up and get out of the seat, to let somebody else come in. That's a hard, that's harder than going to your basement and finding a piece of cardboard, and writing, uh, some kind words on a sign. That is harder to do.

00:40:25 Michele Norris: 'Cause you're giving up something.

Michelle Obama: Right. It is harder to, sit down, at the Thanksgiving table, and have some hard conversations with relatives and people that you love, who are misinformed.

00:40:41 Michelle Obama: Like I said, everybody, in in this country, knows somebody, in their lives, close to them, who has allowed this to exist, or has just conveniently not brought it up. And it has been very easy to just, ignore it. You know, not to challenge hires, at the, at the table, you know, not to, not to give up your tax break, to improve, education systems. You know, that's the hard work. For me I think, time will only tell, um, whether we have it in us, as a nation to do that work.

00:41:24 Michele Norris: I think we do. I'm an optimist,

Michelle Obama: Well as, I,

Michele Norris: I think we do. And I think, I'm a pragmatist also, I think we better.

Michelle Obama: I, we must. We must, I, I agree with you Michele, I, you know, I tend to think that, um, what my time serving as First Lady has shown me, is that this this, this is a a decent, kind, country. Um, that people are just trying to get by. They know what they know, um, they're willing to know more, they're willing to be open, but everybody is, working hard, everybody is strapped. You know, the, this, economic inequality isn't just hitting Black folks, right. There are a lot of working class folks in small towns, farmers, losing everything right now. Who are feeling uh, and have felt, for a very long time, a level of stress, that has, unbeknownst to them, it has nothing to do with race, and ethnicity, and it has everything to do with the capitalistic structure, it's all an economic issue. 00:42:31 But when you're hurting, and you're afraid, and you are struggling too, and you see you know, you are told that others are advancing at your expense, and those others, are people of a different hue, you know, your fear takes over, because, you're in survival mode, too. And we've gotta find a way, all of us, to see that humanity, in each other, so that there aren't us's and them's, I think in the end, that's what we have to remember, I mean it's easy for us, as people of color, to demonize folks who are out there, protesting against Black lives matter. They're not right, in their positions, but their fears are coming from somewhere. Because folks aren't just crazy. You know, folks are out there trying to work and trying to keep it together, and when you can't do it, and when things feel stacked against you, as many of the people who are afraid are, then you lash out. 00:43:30 So that's why in the end, we've got to have leadership in there, that's gonna look out for the best interest of all of us. We're so close, if we could just open up and empathize a bit, and spend more time trying to wonder where folks' anger comes from. And to put ourselves in those shoes, not just white folks in Black shoes, but visa versa, we can understand where the common challenges are. And we can start doing that work. To get us to a better place.

00:44:00 Michele Norris: When you feel the lows, how do you get through that? How do you keep moving forward?

Michelle Obama: Yeah. Well, this is, the part of, of knowing yourself, knowing how to replenish yourself with the things that do bring you joy. So for me, my spirit is, is lifted, when I am feeling healthy, when I am surrounded by good people, you know, so I, I reach out. I reach out to my family, and to my friends, uh, even in this time, of, quarantine, you know, I fought to continue to find a way to stay connected to the people in my life who bring me joy, and my girlfriends, my husband, my, my kids, it's, it's, it's the small things. It's small, the small rituals. 00:44:53 Right. For me, there's no magic to it, but it is, effort, right. Because you have to recognize that you're in a place, a bad place, in order to get out of it. Um, so you kinda have to sit in it for a minute, to know, oh oh, this is feel, I'm feeling off. So now I gotta, I gotta feed myself with something better. And sometimes for me that means turning it off. Right, it it means turning off the phone, not taking in the news, because it is negative energy, I learned that in the days of the White House, and, sometimes we feel like that's irresponsible, to just cut off, and I think it is, if you do it over long term, but for me, for my mental health, there's some times I cannot look. I need to just take a moment, and to just not look. For a second. [laughs]



00:45:47 Michele Norris: I try to be honest about it, with both my kids but especially my daughter, because, the strong Black woman trope, is, a cement necklace.

Michelle Obama: Oh god, yes.

Michele Norris: You know, that's supposed to feel like pearls. It's supposed to be a compliment, but what it is, is, it perpetuates the notion that we can throw anything at you. We can just hurl anything at you and you will catch it, and look elegant doing it. And that's just not true. And so, I try to be honest in my low moments, you know, this this has been a tough day, this has been a tough day.

00:46:26 Michelle Obama: We will get through this, uh, you know cause the thing we have to remember is like we've been through, tough times, in this nation. Um, and, we, we are in a unique moment in history. We are living through, something, that no one in our lifetimes has lived through it. Uh,

Michele Norris: 2020 is, just extra. [laughs] In all kinds of ways.

Michelle Obama: Who would've thought. It's like phew! What more do you have for us, 2020!

00:47:02 Michelle Obama: I just want to thank Michele for joining me today, and I just want to revisit something she said in the middle of our conversation — She said “Don’t reach for normal, reach for better.”

That really feels like what we’re all trying to do right now, especially when it comes to seeking out real and lasting justice. So many of us are finding out — that’s easier said than done. Reaching for something better is hard. And it is draining. And it’s difficult to sustain.

So to all of you out there who are working so hard, for better, and having those difficult conversations with your family members during this time, pushing the people in power to make long overdue changes—I just hope that you all are also finding the time to take care of yourselves.

00:47:56 Because I couldn't be more proud of the work that folks are doing out there. I couldn't be more inspired by the way that so many people are making their voices heard and the changes that have already been achieved as a result of that work. But as you're probably finding out now, this is a process that is going to take not just days or weeks, but years and decades. It's a relay race, and, and we've got to pass the baton off to each other so that we can keep up the momentum and the enthusiasm that we're gonna need to make sure this change is ultimately implemented. So make sure that you all are listening to your spirits and to your bodies through this period. And when you need a moment to recharge, take it and do not feel guilty about needing to take that break.



00:48:51 Because in the end, if we wanted anything to change in this world of ours, it's gotta start with each of us, individually, having the energy to show up in the world the way we want to. That's how it all begins—right inside your mind and right inside your heart.

So good luck out there, everybody. And thank you for listening... I'll talk to you all again soon.

00:49:22 Anna Holmes: The Michelle Obama Podcast is a Spotify Original, presented and produced by Higher Ground Audio in collaboration with Dustlight Productions.

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The song you heard at the beginning of this show is "Not For Sale" by Sudan Archives.

Thanks for listening to The Michelle Obama Podcast. 00:50:50

00:51:03 BREAK 00:51:23