Dukakis after his loss Part I

**THE ORDINARY LIFE OF MICHAEL DUKAKIS [PART 1 OF 2]**

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The man who would have been dining at the White House as the 41st president of the United States is, instead, at home in Brookline one recent morning, preparing a breakfast of cold cereal, coffee and tropical juice, and, at the same time, extolling the virtues of bread, particularly the loaf of corn and molasses bread he has baked for breakfast.

''Do you love bread?'' he wants to know. ''Because I'm going to show you the greatest invention ever, a bread machine that's so simple -- you're going to taste the product of it -- it takes five minutes to mix the ingredients, and then you press a button, and let me tell you, I haven't bought a loaf of bread for six months, and I defy anybody to produce better toast.'' After 12 years as governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and after traveling 600,000 miles in 20 months in a bitter presidential campaign that ended in humiliating defeat, and after months of exile in Hawaii and Australia and having just completed a semester of teaching at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Michael Dukakis has come home to Perry Street, Brookline, back to his tomato garden and back to those three-mile power walks and back to marketing at the Stop & Shop on Harvar d Street, and back to teaching government at Northeastern University, and, yes, he's still playing by the rules, still dedicated to Democratic ideals, still addicted to public service and still, for the moment, at least, obsessed with that loaf of corn a nd molasses bread that he's baked, in all likelihood, precisely according to the recipe.

"That's the animal," he says, pointing to the Dakar Turbo Baker II Breadmaker. "It comes with this book that must have 25 recipes. The original took four hours, but with this turbo motor, they've got it down to 2 1/2, and it's incredible. You will never, ever buy a loaf of bread again, because this gives you fabulous bread for half a buck a loaf, and it's great fun."

Four years after losing the presidency to George Bush, Dukakis is resurrected -- personally, if not politically -- and at 58, he's in terrific shape physically, brimming with energy, confidence and optimism, and fully recovered, emotionally and psychologically, from the nightmare of 1988.

Dukakis rises at 6 most mornings, pores through the morning newspapers, prepares his own breakfast, on this day a mixture of raisin bran and corn flakes with skim milk, and, of course, the bread. Although he still buys suits at Filene's Basement, he dresses more casually these days, usually a sweater over a button-down shirt, open at the collar, and brown corduroy trousers and New Balance sneakers. He's at Northeastern most weekdays, teaching graduate and undergraduate courses in politics, government and administration. If it's raining, he takes the T. Otherwise, he walks to and from school, four miles.

From the toaster, he plucks a slice of corn and molasses bread, and daubs it with margarine as deftly as Julia Child meringues a baked Alaska.

"Look at the texture," he says, "and I had nothing to do with it. The only problem is that it's absolutely addictive. Do you remember the old Anadama bread they used to make in Rockport? And then Pepperidge Farm put out a corn and molasses loaf for a while? It's just regular flour, and then you add a third of a cup of molasses and a third of a cup of corn meal, and mix it together. Take a look at these recipes," he says, reaching for the handbook. "I'll get you the identification number. How much? Only 149 bucks in the catalog, about half of what you'd pay at, what's that company -- Sonoma something? They have one in the $260 range, but here, taste this," he says, sliding a slice onto a plate, "and tell me that's not bread."

One day recently, while George Bush is accusing Bill Clinton of having the worst environmental record in America, Dukakis arrives in a basement room at Northeastern's Student Center, where he is about to deliver an address that has attracted a standing-room crowd of 90, including his mother, Euterpe, a graceful 88 years old. Spotting her, he approaches, and even before taking off his raincoat, he bends down to kiss her, then moves to the front of the room, nodding to acquaintances and shaking hands until he arrives, finally, at the dais, where, a moment later, he is introduced by a student, who says, "The nation's loss is Northeastern's gain."

Four years ago, the national press was tape-recording every word Dukakis uttered. On this day, however, not even local newspapers or television stations have assigned anyone to evaluate his thoughts on presidential politics, which is unfortunate, for his 20-minute speech and the question-and- answer period that follows are intelligent and provocative and teeming with ideas about rebuilding the nation's public education systems and developing national health insurance and establishing a domestic peace corps and retraining defense workers and improving transit systems and investing in public works, all financed, for the most part, by reductions in military expenditures, and all designed to restore not only America's economy but also America's spirit.

After four years of relative silence, and near the end of a primary campaign in which he has been as popular as a leper, Dukakis is appearing more frequently in print and on television, not only to promote Bill Clinton but also to castigate George Bush, chiding the president in front of the Northeastern audience, for example, for conceding to Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany recently that it was essential for the United States to maintain 150,000 troops in Western Europe.

"For heaven's sake, what for?" Dukakis says. "Why do the British and the French and the Germans need us to defend them from Bulgarians and Romanians? And why do we still have 50,000 troops in Japan, while Japan has 50,000 English-speaking salesmen in the United States?"

He censures the press, too, for obsessive coverage of trivialities, like Clinton's sex life and Quayle's golf game.

"I'm on CNN this afternoon with, who else, Bernie Shaw, and I told him, look, I'm not interested in chitchatting about the campaign. I want to focus on health care. Will I get away with it? No. I'm sure he'll ask about the campaign, but I'm trying to use my 10 minutes, or whatever Warhol said is our celebrity time, to focus on health insurance.

"It's exceedingly frustrating to be a presidential nominee trying to say something important in your speech of the day, which you make at 10 in the morning so that you can hit the 6 [newscast] at night, and then Sam Donaldson asks, 'What do you think of our latest poll?' And you say, 'Sam, I just made a major speech on foreign policy, and you're asking me about your poll?' What you want to say is that it's not worth the paper it's printed on, except that if you do, that's what appears on the news.

On a suburban street in Brookline, where Euterpe Dukakis has lived for nearly half a century, the softness of a spring morning is broken by the whine of a chain saw, while yellow daffodils stretch in sunshine that is sweetened by the aroma of purple hyacinths. In the garage, a well-worn Oldsmobile bears the scars of her son's presidential campaign -- faded bumper stickers that say "Dukakis '88" and "Just Say NO to Republicanism."

Despite the early hour, she is dressed formally and impeccably in a soft- purple skirt and jacket set off by white pearls. She is cautious at first, repeating questions, but she warms to the opportunity to speak about her son.

"Was the defeat in 1988 painful?" she repeats.

"Yes, of course, for all of us, and particularly for Michael and Kitty, but we don't have to go into that. Michael is a very strong person, and he and Kitty are over their disappointment. But it was very, very difficult. Michael was still governor then, and being involved in the state and in Kitty's illness, you wonder, and everybody did, how he survived. Well, he survived because he's strong. And he's free of bitterness because we are people of sense and, I hope, intelligence, and what's gone by is gone by, so let's forget it. We've had tragedies in our family, but we move on."

In surprising ways, she is more aggressive than her son, more partisan in her politics and more willing to say not only what's in her head but also what's in her heart.

"You see, Michael never anticipated the meanness of Mr. Bush's campaign, because Massachusetts is not like that. You don't expect someone of presidential timber to be like that. I have my own ideas about why things are coming out against Mr. Clinton -- Republicans. When Michael was running for president, his organization was told about Mr. Bush's extramarital affair, but Michael said that unless they had absolute proof, he would permit nothing like that to come out. This time, the Democrats must be ready. They know it will happen again, because Mr. Bush has said that, yes, he was going to win and he'd do everything necessary. Politics is a dog-eat-dog world. Imagine, the president of the United States saying such a thing!

"And there was a lot of hostility because Michael had a name that was not German or Swedish or even Jewish. It was Greek, and what do we know about Greeks? Who are they? What are they? The American public is not too ready for foreign names. We had Eisenhower, but he was a general, and, of course, Americans grab generals and royalty to their bosom. A secretary in a doctor's office once said to me that Michael was too honest. Now, what does that mean? How can a person be too honest? You're either honest or you're dishonest. Period. Do I think Michael is too polite for politics? No. Michael is an honorable man, and Mr. Bush is not. That is the difference."

Asked to reconcile the image in the press of her son as cold and humorless, and the image among family and friends that he is warm and witty, she bristles.

"Well, excuse me, but with the press, with reporters, maybe Michael was not 'Hail, fellow, well met!' and 'Let's go have a beer,' but Michael was never like that. He was governor, and being governor is not cracking jokes. Michael was not one to fool around, although when they had the 'Bulgga' thing on St. Patrick's Day, Michael took it, and he gave it, too, the humor with the people there.

"Jerry Williams? I have never listened to him. I've heard about him, but never listened, and I've never read Mr. Barnicle in the Globe, except once. When Michael first thought about running for the governorship, and Mr. Barnicle said, 'Who is this Michael Dukakis, anyway?' Well, I have never, ever read Mike Barnicle since. See, those people, I don't read them, because I know what they're doing. They're earning their living, but they're doing it in a way that none of us approve of."

Does it hurt?

She nods.

"Very much.

"It's part of politics, but if you aren't in it, you don't know how much it can hurt, especially when it's your child. I have -- I won't call it a quarrel with the press, but it's a deeply ingrained hurt, because they only report news and not explanations. The Willie Horton thing, over and over, and who ever stepped forward to say that Ronald Reagan had three similiar experiences as governor of California, and that most of the states had the same law as Massachusetts, and that what happened w as just an exception? But that was never pointed out, and so it became a simple exploitation of people's beliefs and ideas. That's all it was. And even though [Republicans] may have denied it, they never apologized about that thing about Kitty burning th e American flag, and you know, when you plant a seed like that, a little seed, that's all simple people need, and unfortunately we have many, many unthinking people."

About her son's reputation as a man without passion, she is puzzled, although she is quick to say that he was wrong to respond nonchalantly when Bernard Shaw of CNN asked in a televised debate whether Dukakis would favor the death penalty for a man convicted of raping Kitty Dukakis.

"That was a mistake, and I'm sure he realizes it. Michael's reaction to such a situation would have been just as human as anybody else's. What would any man do under the circumstances? He'd go out and kill or strangle, and Michael would, too. It couldn't be otherwise, if something like that happened to his daughter or his wife. But he was shocked at the question. How can you ask any man, any person such a question? It was a question that had been planned for a long time, but it was a question th at should never have been asked, and that is another hurt from the press."

Asked if she hopes her son runs again for public office, she neither hesitates nor does she repeat the question.

"As a mother," she says, shaking her head and speaking softly, "no."

"Let me tell you what I think happened," says Dukakis in explaining the vilification of him.

"I started out as a very, very, very long shot, as I described myself, right? At the time we were doing exceedingly well here in Massachusetts. In fact, the opening of my State of the State Message in 1988 was that pride is back in Massachusetts, and it was. Then, this guy who was a very, very, very long shot starts working in the campaign, and he doesn't do badly in Iowa, wins in New Hampshire, does very well on Super Tuesday, and lo and behold, by the end of April, I mean, it's Camelot with Dukakis. Jesus, I mean, our guy, he's gonna do it.

"But I think there was not only an enormous letdown, in part because I lost, and in part because I had done a lousy job, but Massachusetts-bashing became a key element in the Bush campaign. Now, that would not have happened if I had not run. The harbor cleanup had been under way four years. We had the MWRA and contracts going out with no help from Bush, but all of a sudden, people are saying, gee, is it really the dirtiest harbor in the world? And Willie Horton. Suddenly, these issues took on larger-than-life qualities, and they were all very critical.

"I can tell you this, one element in Mario Cuomo's calculus is the almost certain knowledge that if he ran for president, the bashing of New York would have made what happened in 1988 in Massachusetts child's play. It would be horrible, horrible. Losing the election was not pleasant. Going through my last two years as governor was not pleasant. Kitty going through what she had to go through was not pleasant, but life has its ups and downs, and the main thing is to be involved, to be engaged."

The "not pleasant" ordeal that Kitty Dukakis went through was a bout with alcohol and drugs that accelerated until she ingested rubbing alcohol and was rushed to a hospital. Following hospitalization at Edgehill Newport in Rhode Island and a courageous recovery, she wrote in her biography, "Now You Know," that her husband's campaign for the presidency had brought her "perilously" close to becoming first lady, a word she chose because of her belief that the first crisis in the White House wou ld have sent her out of control. Today, the woman Michael Dukakis still calls his bride is enrolled in a program at the University of Massachusetts to become certified to counsel others with alcoholism.

"But the 1988 campaign?" Dukakis continues. "It's not that one relives the campaign over and over again, but given what's happened, Bush's inability to come to grips with anything these days. I was watching television yesterday, and he's standing around with a lot of people, and can't decide whether to go to Rio. And yeah, I am kind of mad at myself for losing the election, you know, but I don't blame Bush. If we'd done a better job, we'd be there. On the other hand, that's then, now's now. I'm a guy that doesn't look back. I tend to look forward."

What about the Irish tradition of not getting mad, but getting even?

"Nah. I just want Bush outta there 'cause I think the country's suffering, and, I mean, who needs another four years of this, right? So, that's my goal, and I'm sorry I wasn't able to do it in '88. But I'm not a guy who dwells in the past and replays these things. Well, you do for a while, but you get tired of replaying, and you've got to move on. And, look, as I mentioned to you the other day, the question is, are you going to flit around or are you going to focus on a key issue or two, and go at it."

He gets up from the kitchen table.

"Do you want some more bread?"

Family and friends are surprised at the perception that Dukakis is devoid of humor. During the campaign, George Keverian, former speaker of the Massachusetts House, told an audience that he knew a cheap way to depress the Central Artery. "Let Mike Dukakis talk to it, and it'll slowly depress itself." And from the audience, someone yelled, "And he could bore the third harbor tunnel, too."

Biographers Robert Turner and Charles Kenney were interviewing Dukakis in his office and, as Kenney remembers, asked delicately about his sense of humor, or lack of it. "His answer made him a candidate for the Humor Hall of Fame," says Kenney, who recalls that Dukakis looked across the table and said, with a straight face, "I've always been kind of funny." And then, sensing their amazement, he said, "No, really!"

Pressed for examples of Dukakis humor, his father-in-law, Harry Ellis Dickson, retired violinist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, says wryly: "Yes, I remember something funny Michael said. We were having dinner at a restaurant once, and Michael said, 'I'll pick up the check.' It was hilarious."

Although almost nobody can remember hearing him tell a joke, Dukakis is actually deft at self-deprecation, and funnier in conversation and more at ease than he is in formal addresses.

Richard Friedman of the Charles Hotel once visited Dukakis at the State House and brought along a lawyer. "Gee," said Dukakis, "if I had continued to practice law, I'd be successful now, instead of being governor."

Barney Frank, identified by George Will as the only intentionally funny congressman, says that Dukakis is smart, but not funny. "And he probably can't sing, either. But I have no reason to think Woodrow Wilson said anything funny, although he was a pretty good president. And I can't remember any rib- ticklers from Leverett Saltonstall either, or Ray Flynn or Frank Bellotti, and let me ask you -- what's the funniest thing John Volpe ever said?"

Dukakis shrugs.

"I'm not a one-liner guy and I'm not a joke-teller. I tell stories on myself, and my humor is topical, but it's the kind you've got to be careful about, particularly in a campaign. The other day, I was doing this CNN thing with Bernie Shaw, and one of the young staff people in Atlanta called in advance, and she said she had film that showed me going from one campaign stop to another, and that I said, 'What am I doing here?' She wanted me to explain my attitude, and I said, look, if you've got it on tape, I said it, but I'm sure I said it in a kidding way. Now, Kennedy's humor was different. He was a master at self-deprecation -- by the way, so is Reagan -- and there was a natural buoyancy about Kennedy. I don't know whether it was the Irish in him, but you couldn't help but respond, because he was always kidding himself."

One day in 1988, during the Florida primary, Dukakis arrived at Red Sox training camp at Winter Haven, and suited up.

"He was in the batting cage and hitting the ball pretty good," recalls former aide Nicholas Mitropoulos of the Kennedy School, "and this guy yells out, 'Hey, Dukakis, you couldn't hit a giraffe in the ass with a bass fiddle.' And when I told Mike about it later, he laughed and said, 'Well, I showed him.' "

It is midday, between classes, and Dukakis is in Northeastern's Dodge building, Room 256, sitting on the floor, and for lunch, he's chewing on a bagel and a Bartlett pear and the American press.

"It's difficult if you're a losing presidential candidate. I hate to be a guy, you know, sour grapes, and I've never really complained about the press, but I think we ought to be saying to our friends in the media, we deserve better. We're hungry for information, and the press is giving us baloney.

"What's happening is that the voters are mad as hell, because negative campaigning diminishes everybody. Now, they're going to tear into Bush, who's got all these conflict problems with guys in his campaign that are lobbyists for foreign governments. And the sex stuff this year? You got [Ted] Koppel throwing that Gennifer Flowers thing on 'Nightline' under the guise of exploring press responsibility? Gimme a break! And then Bush says he's told his people he doesn't want any sleaze? Who t he hell does he think is leaking the stuff?

"We did a terrible job dealing with this in '88. We knew what was coming at us in May, but we had no strategy. How you deal with a negative campaign is a challenge. It's not easy to blunt attacks without getting into the gutter. I tried to say something about the S & L's in '88, and do you know what the TV guys said? Where's the visual? I guess you have to stand in front of a bank or wave a second mortgage. The print press is considerably better, but TV is terrible. Jesus, it's awful."

In any political race, one or two incidents are freeze-framed to define a candidate. For Reagan, it was anger displayed in a debate when his microphone was turned off. For Dukakis, it was anger not displayed at the rape question.

The coolness of his answer, its precision as opposed to passion, turned off voters, and if his mother now insists that Michael would strangle anybody who raped his wife, Dukakis insists otherwise.

"The fact is that I'd been asked that question a thousand times," he says over breakfast, "if you're against the death penalty, then what would you do if someone close to you and so forth. Unfortunately, I treated it as a routine question, as opposed to one where, you know . . ." His voice trails off.

"Instead of capital punishment, I favor a policy where prisoners work to make restitution, and, when it's safe, let them perform community service. But shock television? No. People said it was a trick question, and what's the matter with this guy who's so unemotional? But those are questions you've got to deal with. Watching Clinton, or for that matter Bush, stumbling around at times, I mean, I don't know if you remember, but if Bush had lost the election, people would have said that the point when someone asked him if he was saying that he'd brand a woman a criminal for having an abortion, and Bush said, well, 'I haven't sorted that out yet.' Now, if he had lost, I mean, 'I haven't sorted that out yet' -- that would have been the metaphor for his loss."

One day, en route to Andover to deliver a speech, Dukakis, as governor, was being briefed by an aide. Having concluded the business, their conversation turned personal.

"How was vacation?" the governor asked.

"Great," said the aide. "I went hiking."

Being a fitness fanatic, the governor approved.

"Where did you go?"

"New Hampshire."

Dead air.

"You know," the governor said, finally, "there are plenty of places to go hiking in Massachusetts."

Although he was expressing affection for Massachusetts, he sounded brusque.

Nearly everyone who has worked with Dukakis has a story about his coldness. As one former State House reporter recalled, "The most emotional thing I ever heard him say was that spring is coming."

But friends say there's a gap between the public perception and the private person, that Dukakis is fun to be with.

"He's had a bad rap," says Mitropoulos. "I've seen how he deals with people, from foreign ministers to janitors, and the warmth comes through in the way he treats students."

It is not a subject Dukakis talks about easily.

"In Florida, folks said, gee, you're nothing like the guy on television, but, hey, what can I tell you? I am what I am."

He gets up from the breakfast table.

"I'm going to have another slice of toast."

But what about the hatred, the attacks by talk-show hosts, like Jerry Williams?

He shrugs.

"He's been banging me for years. Look, when I was doing well, it didn't make a particle of difference. I mean, how many people listen to Williams, anyway, 60,000? In a state of six million? And look, if you're governor 10 or 11 years and you don't have 60,000 people who don't like you, then you're headed for sainthood. Now, I wasn't around when the Globe ran a story on Williams and his girlfriend. Was she on the public payroll? And what happened to his wife?

"Does talk radio bother me? No. I don't like it, but, look, Jerry Williams, in his younger days, was a liberal, a reformer, and now, he's, hey, let's beat people up. Sam Rayburn said any jackass could knock down a barn, but only a carpenter could build one. So you've got to decide in life whether you're a jackass or carpenter, and Jerry Williams has made his decision."

In 1974, when Dukakis was campaigning for governor, 10-year-old John DiBiase was riding his Raleigh around Belmont, distributing Dukakis stickers, and now, a generation later, he is a graduate student in government at Northeastern and an aide to Dukakis, a position he lobbied for last semester in weekly calls to Dukakis in Florida.

"He was the first person I voted for," DiBiase says with obvious affection. "He's a fantastic teacher, always pressing -- wanting to know if you've read this article or seen that column? He makes me want to get up early to read the newspapers."

The admiration and loyalty among students is obvious. On a recent Friday afternoon, just before a holiday, Dukakis managed to induce more than half the class to join in a discussion that would anesthetize most students, the evolution of American Federalism.

"He's so positive," says John Schneider, "and if you hope for a career in government, it's nice to be around someone who believes in it."

Although Dukakis rarely drives an automobile, for his interview on CNN, he arrives at Channel 5 in a white Chrysler LeBaron.

"You're driving a convertible?" someone asks.

"It's Kitty's car," he says.

Inside, he takes off his raincoat.

"Want a cup of coffee?" asks a receptionist.

"I'll get it," says Dukakis. "Show me where."

From a nearby building, Channel 5 executives S. James Coppersmith and Paul LaCamera walk over in the rain to say hello.

So, Dukakis is asked, are you involved in the election?

"Oh, I'll try to be helpful. I know Clinton and think the world of him, and he's gotten such a pasting. It's outrageous, and those of us who know him will have to start saying good things about him. Slick Willie? I never heard that phrase, never. Ask the other 49 governors, Republicans and Democrats, and they'll tell you Clinton's the best because he's smart, hard-working and a great negotiator."

"Let's get away from the unimportant crap," says Coppersmith. "How's Kitty?"

"She had a great experience in Florida. She's enrolled in a counseling program at UMass that involves 700 hours field work, which she did at a women's treatment center in Delray Beach. She's good at it, and now she's got another semester academically, and then she gets certified and goes to work."

"I hate you," says Coppersmith. "Every time I see you, I remind myself I'm going to go on a diet. Don't you ever eat?"

"Well, I'm still a lean 160, and I walk from Brookline to Northeastern and back, so I'm walking four miles a day."

"So am I," says Coppersmith, "but I'm eating a pastrami sandwich while I'm doing it."

"Excuse me, sir," says a technician, "we're ready."

In the studio, for 20 minutes, Dukakis sits in front of a huge photograph of Boston and faces a blank camera, listening by means of an earpiece to the CNN broadcast and, at the same time, engaging in small talk with a cameraman and a producer about movies, restaurants and politics.

"Why is Greek Easter different from Roman Catholic Easter?" asks the producer. "Did Christ rise twice or something?"

"No," says Dukakis. "It has to do with Passover, the full moon, and some sequence that if you follow it, then we Greeks are right and the rest of these folks are all screwed up."

And then, after a pause, suddenly, it begins.

"Yes, Bernie, I'm fine, how are you?"

Shaw weighs in at once with a question about the campaign.

"Well, unfortunately, Bernie, I expect the worst. Rich Bond, who is the president's handpicked new chairman of the Republican National Committee, was in front of the National Press Club recently, defending those Willie Horton ads again, so I guess it's going to be another down-and-dirty campaign. I think the American people are disgusted, and Clinton's right. If that's what's coming from Mr. Bush, then Mr. Clinton has to respond forcefully, and he's got to do a better job than I did."

But Dukakis gets in his licks on health insurance.

"It's going to be a paramount issue.