

“This kid really doesn’t get it,” a clearly frustrated voice blared so loudly that I moved the phone’s speaker a couple of inches from my ear to avoid any future hearing loss. “He just won’t take any responsibility for his actions, and he doesn’t give a shit...and he has 16 more months until he’s off probation! I just don’t think he’s going to make it. I don’t even think you want this one!” I recognized this voice as that of a probation supervisor I had worked with a number of times over the years, but never had I heard frustration get the better of him in such an obvious way. “I’d be happy to see him,” I said. “Send him my way.” When I put the phone down, I wondered if my enthusiasm might have been misplaced and I would have been wiser to tell him I was overloaded and couldn’t take on any more work at this moment. No more than 24 hours later I received a phone call from Ray, a 24-year-old young man who told me his probation officer had passed on my phone number to him. I was intrigued by how polite and soft-spoken he sounded over the phone and we set up an appointment for later in the week.

My work with people involved with the justice system, whether on probation or otherwise, began nearly 13 years ago when I was just a 22-year-old graduate

student in Los Angeles, California. After years of agency work, I now operate a small private practice where probation officers, schools, and word of mouth drive young people like Ray to my door. In community agencies I had worked in the past, I had met with people twice a week as mandated by their sentences. More recently, I have started getting short-term referrals, which often allow for between 4-8 meetings with people. In the case of Ray, we ended up seeing each other 9 times. Probation assumed responsibility for payment for 5 meetings only. After that, our time was up. However, Ray indicated that he wanted to continue to attend on his own volition. This is something that happens with a surprising number of cases. I have learned that if we call the probation officer on the case, the Department of Justice will usually pick up at least half of the cost for the remaining number of sessions, something they were willing to do for Ray.

Three days after first talking to Ray on the phone, he walked into the office wearing blue jeans, a red hoodie, and had headphones dangling around his neck. As he sat down across from me, I had an intuition that he was not a stranger to this process often called “therapy,” a fact he would confirm as we began talking. It was as if he was bracing himself for what was to come. He sat back in his chair, both of

his hands tightly grabbing on to an arm almost as if he was at the mercy of a neophyte airline pilot preparing to practice landing a massive 747 for the first time. Perhaps he was expecting a barrage of advice disguised as “psychoeducation?” Or was he steeling himself for inquiries about what might be neurochemically “wrong” with him? Everything about how he was composing himself suggested to me that this young man had heard it all before.

My first query was clearly not one he was expecting. “Do you mind if I ask what you are listening to?” gesturing to his headphones. Ray raised his head up to look me in the eyes for the first time since walking into the room, his gaze a blend of skepticism and curiosity. “Styles P and Pharoahe Monch,” he replied. “How old are you again?” I said as a smile crept on to my face. “Why?” he inquired. “It’s just that most 24-year-olds I have spoken with aren’t keen to the ways of Styles P and Pharoahe Monch,” I said still smiling knowing the album he was referencing was over a decade old and was not one many young men of his age were typically in step with. “A lot of this new shit ain’t real. I can feel what Styles and Pharoahe are saying,” Ray declared.

And with this, we were off. I had been granted the great privilege of riding shotgun in Ray's lyrical journey. For the next forty-five minutes we listened to music on his phone and critically examined the verses he found most meaningful.

Verses like this one from 2Pac in the song 'Only God Can Judge Me' spoke to Ray:

I Supreme Lord And Master (ISLAM)

But at times,

The words ring empty

When I see another homie blood splattered

Dreams get shattered

Family fractured

Ugly reputations is what give television ratings

Problem story plastered

Learn the science of our plight

These depictions keep penitentiaries packed tight

But only God can judge me

Once I fade away from life.

Or this verse from 'If I Ruled The World' by Nas:

How many Super Bowls passed

My mind's eye showing possibility so I grasp

Of a hood block,

With no patrolling cops

No empty baggies once holding rocks

Shells from a glock

*But the wisdom I've acquired allows us to question
what was taught*

Pause in the moment

The impulse can be stopped.

During the conversation that followed I learned that not only did Ray have an affinity for rap music, but he also wrote some rhymes of his own.

Travis: Listening to you today, Ray, I have a hunch that you and rap music have been homeboys for a long time and you both share a long and storied history together. Am I right or wrong?

Ray: Yeah, I mean, I can't remember my life without rap. It's like it was with me from the moment I came out of the womb. You know, I'm sure that's not true, but that's what it feels like.

T: Wow! Are you telling me that no one has been a friend to you longer than rap has? (He nods his assent) This seems like a really important relationship. Would it be okay with you if I tried to understand the relationship you and rap share a bit better?

R: Sure, go for it.

T: I'm curious, to know if anyone has ever asked you about your relationship with rap before?

R: (pauses 10 seconds or so) I mean, not really. My homies and I cypher back-and-forth about it, but... you know... I haven't really broken down my relationship with it if that makes any sense.

T: It does make sense. Thank you. Other than your homies, does anyone else ask you about your relationship with rap?

R: No, except for like teachers and probation and other adults throughout my whole life trying to tell me it's violent and the music of the devil (takes his index fingers and makes horns over his head) and shit like that (laughs).

T: So if I'm hearing you correctly, Ray, those adults don't really ask you about your relationship with rap,

but rather tell you the sort of relationship
you *should* have with it?

R: *Exactly!* It's like they don't know shit about it but
want to tell you it's the root of all evil.

T: This is really remarkable to me, Ray! Would it be
okay if I asked you a few more questions about it?

R: Oh yeah, no problem.

T: If it gets boring to you or you would rather go in
another direction just tell me, okay?

R: Word (a hip-hop phrase that in this context
verbalizes agreement).

T: What do you think the adults you just mentioned, like former teachers or people involved with probation, could stand to learn from your relationship with rap?

R: They would never learn anything because they won't listen. Their minds are already done made up.

T: Do you mind if I ask what kind of headphones those are, Ray? (pointing to his neck).

R: These? Oh, man, these are Beats (a popular brand of headphones).

T: Now I heard you say that those folks wouldn't listen, and I want you to know that I absolutely believe you. Even still, I want to invite you to imagine for a second that we could take a pair of Beats, maybe even magic Beats, and slip them on to the people that can't or won't hear while they were sleeping and the message would sneak through their ears and permeate their minds whether they wanted it to or not. Imagine now that they have woken up. What

education would rap have given them?

R: Man, I wish you could pick me up some of *those* headphones (said laughing)!

T: That would be pretty cool, right? Maybe that's a project we can work on later (both of us laughing).

R: For real! What I think they would learn is that there are a lot of people in the world who don't have a voice. If you are someone in the world who does have a voice, you know, that's great. Good for you. And by voice I mean, you know, we all have like a voice box that works. What I mean when I say voice is a voice that others can hear or will really listen to. My whole life I've never really had that voice because I'm poor and black... except when I rap. This is true, you know, for like pretty much my whole crew in my neighborhood, too. Rap is our voice.

T: Are you of the opinion that the people who won't listen that you referenced earlier would learn from the

“magic Beats” that rap could serve as a voice for the voiceless?

R: Exactly. I mean, if everyone listens to everything you say, anyway, then fine, you don't need something like rap. Do you know Public Enemy (P.E.)?

T: Oh, Ray, now you're speaking my language, brother. I grew up with P.E.

R: Word! (strong agreement) There's a verse in the song 'He Got Game' that goes (begins rapping):

The more I wild out

Allows me to achieve that street clout

While lives are turned into tools

Did dominant narratives actually raise a bunch of fools?

Our escape from a jumpshot or a hip-hop plate?

While theirs is school?

But either one of us can lose

Trying to chase what Lupe articulated as The Cool,

White men in suits don't have to jump

Still a thousand and one ways to lose with his shoes

R: You know, that line, "White men in suits don't have to jump," that's what I'm talking about.

T: Right, there's that old saying, "White men can't jump," when it comes to basketball. Did you see P.E. do something clever with it?

R: For sure. White men don't have to jump to make money and white men don't *have to* rap to be heard. Don't get me wrong, I write rhymes because I love to. Sometimes when I write it's just about partying or females or something light. But I also write because it

allows me to have a voice. You know, it's like rap says to the world I'm going to say shit how it is whether you like it or not.

It was becoming increasingly clear that Ray's relationship with rap, and the hip-hop culture in which it resided, was one of protest, freedom, and inspiration. As our conversation continued to traverse the electrifying and winding roads of rap music, we alternated between listening to songs on Ray's phone and discussing, almost philosophizing, at the conclusion of each. That served as inspiration for the following exchange:

T: Do you think rappers are philosophers?

R: No doubt. Rap is philosophy but without all the old white cats (said laughing).

T: Socrates is not the father or first philosopher of rap?

R: No! (Laughs harder)

T: Who do you think is?

R: Probably KRS-ONE.

T: What in your opinion is the job of a philosopher?

R: To make people think, like hold a mirror up to the world so they can see how foolish they are.

T: Did KRS-ONE have a rhyme where you believe he did this?

R: For sure! Check this out (pulls out his phone and begins searching for a song entitled “The Truth”)

Peep the crucifix

Comes across mysterious

With I(j)ehova hanging from the partisan nails of politics

The origins

Governing men of Romans

Did agree to its means justifying capital punishment

For the minds

They despised

To keep all the sheep in line

While revolution sparked divine

Christ

But check the rhyme

*What if they lynched him hanging from the branch of a
tree*

Then burned him half alive

Peep manipulation B

We would pray to a tree

Then human torching eventually

Fire associated with hell

Overstand irony

*When a bullet burns its way into your brother's
physical*

Laid to rest in a wooden casket

Damned its cyclical.

T: What do you hear in these rhymes?

R: It's like it exposes hypocrisy, you know what I mean? People believe things about god or religion or whatever without even opening up a book or thinking. They just accept a history they like or feel comfortable about or that some cat on TV tells them is right.

T: Are you of the opinion that there are multiple histories?

R: Oh yeah, no doubt. The history that you get in history books is the only one most people read, though.

T: Where do these histories come from?

R: Usually from your teacher and books in school.

T: Where does the information in those books come from?

R: I mean, that mostly comes from white people and their ancestors. You know, I took a philosophy class in college like 4 years ago and I don't think we talked about one brother the whole time. That's part of the reason I never fit in there.

T: And the fact that the only history that was discussed was from a white perspective, what does that mean for the other histories?

R: You see them in like Roots (a television mini-series from the 1970's depicting the life of a black slave in the United States) and shit (laughing). We had to watch that in high school. That shit is so weak.

T: What would be a stronger portrayal?

R: You just heard one. I mean, that's what KRS is doing. He's giving the other ones. But it's like I told you earlier, people don't want to listen to those.

T: Do you believe you are a philosopher?

R: I never really thought about it like that. I know I'm a writer. But I guess that means I am a philosopher.

T: Do you mind if I tap into your own philosophical expertise?

R: Sure. I know what you're go to say next (said with a wry smile). You are going to ask me about my philosophy on shit.

T: You know me too well already, Ray!

R: My philosophy is simple. It's to see the truth even

when they try and obscure it. It's to go deeper. If you don't, you'll believe a lie.

T: How do you see deeper?

R: You have to do what my grandmother says: ignore the noise. You can't believe everything you hear. You can't even believe everything you think you see.

T: Is your grandmother a wise philosopher, too?

R: She's the wisest person I know.

T: What has her philosophy taught you about the person you want to be?

R: She always says I didn't raise no fool.

T: Would you say that your grandmother's philosophy and the philosophy of KRS-ONE are similar?

R: Hmm... (pauses for 10-15 seconds) that's crazy, bro. I never thought of it like that, but I guess so.

T: In what ways would you say they are similar?

R: Both of them are encouraging me to think in my own way. To be my own person. Basically, just be wise to the ways of the world.

T: Do you think that it would be helpful in our work to call on the ideas of great philosophers like your grandmother and also KRS-ONE as we try to navigate the situation that brought you to see me?

R: Yeah, it's just crazy though because my grandmother hates rap. Like she thinks it "corrupts the youth" (fingers on both hands raised to make air quotes).

T: If only we had those "Magic Beats." Do you think she would be more open to it then?

R: (Smiles and then laughs) Yeah, and maybe she would see that I'm rapping about like the same shit she's saying but in my own way.

T: Have you ever thought that maybe the spirit of your ancestors and their struggles can be channeled through your raps? Maybe rap is like your history book?

R: I mean... that's deep! I ain't never thought of it quite like that, but yeah, my raps are about me, where I came from, and where my people came from.

T: Would it be okay if we cracked open your rap's history book in our work together?

R: Yeah.

T: Do you think it might provide us with some stories that the regular history books miss?

R: Oh, no question! Stories that regular history books wouldn't even touch!

So engrossed did we both become in the progression of this conversation that time itself seemed to melt away. Ray continued writing his own history through various rhymes and interpretations of them.

At one point Ray could not conceal his enthusiasm for a verse he located on his phone. He said he had been listening to it for a few weeks with a great deal of frequency. It moved him so much that he immediately stopped the music after it had played and rapped the verse himself again.

With these I see

Crimson stains on this project concrete

Yellow tape barricade

Homie wrapped in white sheets

It's a struggle just to eat

So how the fuck do they rationalize judging me or my deeds

Grab a pen

Clear the phlegm

Then commence to bless the beat

Give ya'll a tour of my life

Without walking on my streets

It's my life!

Being scribbled on they college ruled pages

Escape when we cipher up

That type of freedom is amazing

My life!

I watched him intently and took a few deep breaths before breaking the silence we had both fallen into by my first query.

T: Ray, I noticed that you listened to this verse and

then stopped the music and rapped it. Were you, by any chance, deepening your relationship with the lyrics by rapping it yourself?

R: I do this all the time. What I like to do is take a verse that someone else wrote and then just add my own flavor, kind of like sampling (a hip-hop term for taking an older song and mixing it with a new one) or remixing.

T: Do you mean that you take the original rhyme and add your own story?

R: Exactly.

T: If you feel comfortable, I would love to hear the flavor you might add to this rhyme?

R: You know, when it all comes down to it, all I have is the words I write in my rhymes. This is my story and no one can take it away. And it ain't easy. I've seen a lot of shit, been through a lot. Take your shots, but I'm still here, still standing. Like when I rapped that verse just a second ago, this was my story that was running through it. Yeah, those words came from another artist, but my essence came through in the way I rapped it, know what I mean?

Ray was so engaged that by the end of our conversation it was as if he were a different person

than the one who walked through the door an hour before. Certainly he was a poor match for the description of the detached and uncaring young man who lacked any semblance of motivation that the probation officer had provided for me earlier in the week.

The fact there wasn't much sand left in the hourglass of our first meeting had sneaked up on both of us. My mind was left spinning with possibilities for where our future conversations could go. With just five minutes remaining, I invited Ray to reflect with me on what had transpired which broke us both out of our enthrallment.

Travis: Would it be all right if I asked you a little bit about how our meeting today is going?

Ray: That's cool.

T: Thank you, as I know I have asked you a lot of questions today. I appreciate you hanging in there with me. I've noticed that it's very different when we are just speaking as opposed to when we invite rap to the party. Have you noticed this?

R: Yeah, for sure.

T: How do you understand this?

R: It's like when I rhyme... I spit truth from my soul.

T: How is rapping with your soul different than talking with your mouth?

R: When I talk, I think. I thought that's what we're supposed to do in therapy, anyway. That's what all those other fucking shrinks did.

T: Would it be all right if we made up our own therapy and put aside other kinds of therapy you have been through or heard about?

R: Yeah (said with a chuckle and skeptical eyes).

T: What can your soul rhyme that your mouth sometimes might have trouble saying?

R: Freedom. It's like when I'm rapping I can feel the words come through my body. It's natural, like I don't have to think about it.

T: By that do you mean to say that rhymes remove the shackles that are attached to your soul?

R: Right (said turning his head to one side as if in deliberation and then nodding).

T: I saw your face light up. I wonder if inspiration is brewing in your soul this very moment? I know I am guessing so I could very well be wrong.

R: No, it's just that I thought of a verse. You know Lupe Fiasco?

T: Yeah, his shit can be pretty deep.

R: There's a verse in The Show Goes On: (Begins rapping)

It's like we being played

When they say

Strive for a slice

Of they cake

They filthy hands holding hate

Choke out fate

But the rhyme melts the shackles

Oppression disintegrates

Even just for one moment

When we flowing on stage

It goes on and on and on...

T: Have you had shackles on your soul that rap music helps you break free from?

R: Yeah, sometimes it feels like rap is my only way to break free.

T: I notice when you rap that your whole body changes. For example, when we were just talking earlier you were kind of slumped down in your chair. But when you rap your back straightens up, your face lights up, and your hands are active. It's almost like I can see you breaking free right in front of me. What do you think would happen if rap made more frequent visits to your life?

R: I would feel more alive and like I have a voice, you know what I mean? Like being on probation it feels like I have no voice. I just get told what to do and it's like they tell everyone the same thing and don't really care to know what really makes someone tick. It's like we are animals just being pushed through.

T: Do you think Rap music could be a great way for us to understand what makes you tick?

R: The best way!

T: I get the sense you have many important stories to rap about. Would you be willing to write a song between now and next time that paints the part of the picture that probation and maybe other people in your life don't get about you?

R: (Nods affirmatively)

T: Do you know what I mean?

R: Oh yeah, for sure. I already feel a couple of ideas (pointing to his head). Like people automatically assume I'm stupid and like I'm some kind of bad person or criminal or something. They don't even know me.

T: Might writing a rhyme about the parts they don't know release the shackles from your soul?

R: Yeah, but not all the way.

T: It might take more than one rhyme to release them all the way?

R: Yeah.

T: Do you have many stories to tell?

R: Oh yeah!

T: I want you to know that I will support you in writing as many rhymes as it takes.

R: You're the weirdest shrink they have ever sent me to. Not weird like bad, not bad at all, but does probation know you do this?

T: Do what? Ask people to rap?

R: Yeah!

T: They know I help people find the kinds of therapies that best work for them. Do you think this one we've come up with today might work for you?

R: Oh yeah, but I don't even know if this is really therapy.

T: What would you call it?

R: It's like a studio session where I'm making beats with my homies or something.

T: Should we have a studio session once a week together?

R: (Smiles and laughs) For sure.

Ray returned for our second conversation with his black New York Yankees hat turned to the side looking somewhat, but perhaps not yet completely relaxed as he sat down. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper as his right leg bounced up and down. He quickly unfolded it and scanned over its content. "Here are a few lyrics," he said quietly but with conviction as he handed the document to me. I was feeling a bit caught off guard that Ray had picked up so quickly where we left off in our last conversation.

T: Ray, I have to be honest, I feel so privileged to hold this in my hand right now. I wonder if I am holding a gift from your soul?

R: You could say that (kindly smiling at me).

T: “I just had an idea and I’m curious if it would be okay if I shared it with you?” (Ray nodded in the affirmative). “Last week you told me that rhymes come from your soul when they are rapped. I could be wrong here, but I’m just wondering if I read the rhyme on the paper if it might lose some of its soulfulness? And the last thing I want to do is strip the rhyme of its soulfulness.”

R: I’ve got a baseline for this (pointing to his phone). It’s dope (a hip-hop term that means good or of high quality) You want to hear it?

T: I would be honored, Ray.

As the music percolated through the small speakers on his phone I noticed I couldn’t help but bob my head. I looked up and Ray was doing the same. Our eyes caught and Ray smiled slightly with the left side of his mouth. In this moment I pondered whether or not I should invite him to rap, but I hesitated not wanting to make him feel uncomfortable in our second conversation. A few seconds later, Ray reached his hand out indicating he wanted the document with the

lyrics on it back from me. I obliged. Ray bobbed his head a few more times and said, “This still needs a little more time in the lab, but...”

What happened next as Ray began to “spit truth” was almost like a detonation. The words rhythmically rolled off his tongue with an intensity that made me suspect something important was transpiring. I didn’t just listen to what he said, I felt it. Ray’s passion was palpable and I could feel its infusion through my body. We now bobbed our heads in unison and for a brief time it was as if the world had shrunk and we were the only two people that now could fit in it. It was the kind of attunement and connection with another person that was equal parts mysterious and exhilarating.

Grandma said I should reconsider law school

That means I wear a suit and bend the truth and feel awful

Hell no, got a degree but what that cost you

You make a good salary just to pay Sallie Mae

That's real as ever

Ducking bill collectors like a Jehovah's witness

When they showed up at your door at Christmas

Praise God it's hard to stay spiritual

How they got these people on the TV selling miracles

You mean to tell me everything gonna be fine

If I call your hotline and pay 29.99

Well damn, why didn't you say so

Take this check and ask God to multiply all my pesos

T: I am so captivated by what just happened, Ray!
Would it be alright if I tried to understand your rhyming
genius a little better?

R: For sure.

T: May I ask what is it about this rhyme that reveals a part of yourself that other people often fail to get?

R: People think that because I don't have a college degree I'm stupid. They make that judgment up front. Now I'm not trying to say that college is always a bad thing (said looking at me knowing that I'm also a college professor), but, you know, sometimes it's like a scam. Like, I'm a poor kid. Think about how much debt I would rack up by going to college. Dude, it's astronomical. I tried community college for a year. Is that even a good investment? You know, I think a really good rhyme exposes the way people think. So that first part is just like a challenge. You know, just because these are the rules you play the game by doesn't mean they are the only rules.

T: Do you think rhyming helps you create your own rules while also challenging the rules people tell you that you *should* follow?

R: No doubt. And sometimes you challenge rules in rhymes just to make people think.

T: Is that like what you were saying last week about rap as a philosophy, (I asked Ray very much hoping the conversation meant as much to him as it had to me).

R: Exactly, like KRS-One!

T: (Feeling relieved that we seemed to be catching up right where we left off last week, I continued) Can I tap a bit further into your rhyming knowledge here, Ray?

R: Sure.

T: Are you of the opinion that challenging rules is a good thing? (Ray nods in the affirmative) And why do you think it's a good thing to challenge rules?

R: If no one challenges rules, shit gets stale. You know what I mean? Like people start to take things for granted. Sometimes a good rhyme is just like grabbing someone and going (pretends like he's physically shaking someone). It's like, wake up, yo!

T: Do you believe there are different ways to challenge rules?

R: A lot of different ways.

T: Are some ways of challenging rules more effective

than others in your experience?

R: Yeah, I mean, look how I ended up here on probation.

T: How do you mean?

R: Ever since I was a kid I would find myself in certain situations where I would get angry and step (a hip-hop term that means to challenge someone physically, often to a fight) to someone. Yeah, and it's stupid, I know. I've been getting that lecture my whole life.

T: How do you understand the relationship between rap and anger?

R: When I would write rhymes, they would keep me out of trouble. Like if someone was pissing me off, I would just go home and make a beat about it. It's like my anger would leave my mouth through my rhymes.

T: Let me see if I'm hearing you correctly, Ray, because I don't want to get this wrong. Are you saying that rap is able to put anger in its place?

R: Yeah, I don't end up doing something stupid.

T: Maybe this is a long shot, Ray, but do any rhymes come to mind that capture what we are talking about here?

R: No, not really... (pauses in a pensive fashion for 30 seconds or so)... actually, yeah, one does (he composes himself and then begins rapping):

Judicial system mad puzzling

DA presents two options

Jail cell or rat on my cousin

Death sentence if I'm released

Seen on the streets

All free

They'll be like "who you dropped a dime on g"

Obscene language make them ends

So I'm squeezing my pen

That's mightier than the blade

Not trying to see death

Strategize and not be so impulsive

Quiet cats survive

Bullets for the ones boasting

Friday night drive on Colfax

Enjoying the madness

That was created by fascists

Reagan-nomics took our tools away it's so savage

Regardless of politics

This my Mile High life

Shout out to my bail bonds-man.

T: What speaks to you in this verse?

R: The line, 'So I'm squeezing my pen, that's mightier than the blade,' is the main one. I mean, the rhyme talks about the stress, the penitentiary, but then boom (begins rapping) *So I'm squeezing my pen, that's mightier than the blade.*

T: Did you fight with your pen instead of your blade before you ended up on probation?

R: Usually, yes. But there are these times where I just lost it.

T: The pen was knocked out of your hand?

R: Yeah, you could say that.

T: What happens when the pen gets knocked out of your hand?

R: It's like I'm a different person. I do these things I know are stupid, but I just do them, anyway. It makes no damn sense.

T: But when you have the pen?

R: I can do anything.

T: Would it be accurate to say that when you have the pen you can spit truth like you said in our last meeting and that's when Ray the philosopher comes out (I uttered the term Ray the philosopher without giving it much thought and certainly without an understanding of how it would later be adopted in our work together)?

R: For sure. That's kind of a dope name right there, brother... Ray the philosopher (said with gusto)

T: Do many people in your life know Ray the philosopher?

R: My homies do.

T: Is there anyone else you can think of?

R: No, not really.

T: What do you think would happen if we introduced more people in your life to Ray the philosopher and his rhymes?

R: / think it would be good, but like I said last time, nobody wants to listen. They think rap is corrupt.

T: What if we were to inform them that when you can think ahead and fight with your pen through rap it helps you avoid anger and thus probation? Do you think they know this about you?

R: Nah, they don't know that. I still don't know if they would hear me.

T: Even if they knew that it would help you avoid future relationships with probation they still wouldn't hear you?

R: (silence for 15-20 seconds) Maybe. I mean, I hope so.

T: What do you think your grandmother would think about rap as a way to fight with your pen instead of your fists? Have you spoken with her about how you and rap have this kind of relationship?

R: No. I've never spoken much about my rhymes at all with my grandmother. I've just always known how much she hates rap. Like if I bring it up I know she's going to roll her eyes at me.

T: Do you think the kind of rap she hates and the kind of rap you're tight with when you're fighting with your pen are different?

R: Oh, yeah! She thinks rap music is just about cursing, talking about hoes and drugs and shit like that.

T: If she truly knew how rap music unshackled your soul do you think she might begin to have a change of heart?

R: Yeah, I still just don't know if she would listen, though.

T: What if we created a space in here where you could perform for her, and we constructed a marquee (points upward) that lights up and says Ray The Philosopher!?!?

R: (Laughs)

T: If you rapped for her and she could feel the words instead of just hearing them, what do you think might happen?

R: I really don't know.

T: Would you say that your grandmother's wisdom finds its way into your rhymes?

R: Oh yeah, I know it's in there a lot.

T: Can you think of an example in the rhyme that you shared with me at the beginning of our conversation today?

R: My grandmother has always wanted the best for me. That's why I started out that first line with her. You know, (begins rapping) *Grandma said I should reconsider law school*. I was sampling from another rhyme that starts with mama instead of grandma, but it's because I know she wants the best for me and that's why she's always bothering me about school. The thing is, she also taught me to be street smart, which is why I like to challenge the whole foundation that student loans and shit are built upon. It's like a scam for poor people. You know what I mean? I would have never thought about shit in these terms if it weren't for her. I would have never looked deeper. And that's what that second verse is about, too, with people on TV commercials acting like they can save your life and shit. You ever watched TV at like 2:00am?

T: I have a few times, yes.

R: Then you know what I mean, right? There's these cats trying to sell hocus-pocus. They are saying shit like, (changes voice to that of a highly embellished television salesperson) "For 20 years now I've been helping people change their lives. For only three easy payments of \$99.95 you can get the 7 secrets that will make you rich. Order now!"

(Both bellowing with laughter)

T: I didn't know you were an actor, too, Ray?!

R: (Laughs)

T: In all seriousness, if I'm hearing you right, Ray, your grandmother's wisdom is everywhere in your rhymes and she doesn't even know it?

R: Yeah, I guess you're right.

T: Do you think we might be able to invite your grandmother to see, hear, and feel that rap can be a philosophy of street smarts and wisdom and not just a form of music that young people like to listen to?

R: I think so.

T: If we are successful do you think this would be sort of like putting the Magic Beats we talked about on your grandmother's ears?

R: Yeah, but the rhymes will need to be just right.

T: Perhaps we should take some time in here to get them where you want them?

R: For sure.

Ray and I spent our next two conversations focused on taking the various rhymes rapped during our first two meetings and worked on creating a mega-anthology. It was a scintillating process that saw KRS-ONE, Tupac Shakur, and other artists rapping in unison through Ray's mouth. I brought in my laptop computer to help with the process, and Ray made it do things I did not know it was capable of. He turned my computer, and my office along with it, into a fully functioning recording studio. I even created a marquee (clearly the work of a second-rate artist) that read "Ray The Philosopher," which always led to a hearty chuckle from Ray every time I hung it up at the beginning of our meetings.

"Yo, Travis. Turn up the sound a little bit," Ray said as I scurried over to the computer. "Yeah, that's good right there," he reassured me making an a-ok sign with the finger and thumb on his right hand. I watched, often in awe, as Ray meticulously practiced his craft. He was locked in his element, and I was an enthusiastic fellow traveler.

“Nah, we need to change up that baseline a little bit,” he said shaking his head and taking a swig of water. “It doesn’t quite pop. I need more time.”

I have had the great fortune of working on similar projects with people who had sought my counsel in the past, but this was among the most ambitious ventures I had encountered. As we started to make our way toward the end of our fourth session together, I started to wonder if perhaps we had bitten off more than we could chew. Now I knew that Ray had similar feelings. It wasn’t as though we hadn’t been aware of time but more like we had lost ourselves in it.

T: Ray, the last thing I want to do is rush you through this process.

R: But I only get to come here one more time.

T: Well, I know that’s the initial agreement you had with probation, but I can see you as many times as we think would be best.

R: What about you, though? I don’t want to be a leach?

T: What do you mean?

R: You’ve got to get paid, man. This ain’t no charity. This is your livelihood, bro.

T: I really appreciate you thinking of me, Ray. Tell you what, how about I give probation a call and tell them a bit about the situation and see if we can get some more time? In the past this is something they have often been willing to do.

R: What if they're not?

T: Then we will see the work through to its completion anyway, Ray. As long as it takes. This is just too important. Don't you agree? Besides, I have been thinking about something. Would it be okay if I shared it with you?

R: Of course.

T: I know your grandmother is going to come in at the conclusion of our work to celebrate with us. I was wondering what you thought about perhaps inviting other people to meet Ray The Philosopher? Is there anyone else you who you think it might be good to invite to wear the Magic Beats?

R: Hmm... I haven't really thought about it too much.

T: I'm just thinking out loud here, Ray, so stop me if this doesn't make sense, okay?

R: Okay.

T: What do you think would happen if your probation officer were introduced to this idea of you fighting with your pen instead of your fists?

R: I mean, I'm sure he would like it. He's just wants me to keep my hands clean for the next year.

T: What do you think would be the consequences of us not bringing him up to speed on this?

R: I don't know.

T: As it stands now, do you think your PO views you as someone who is going to fight with his fists and get into trouble again or someone who is going to keep his hands clean?

R: (Laughs cynically) I damn sure don't think he trusts me. I think he believes I'm going to be out gang-banging (a hip-hop term for engaging in violent acts as a member of a street gang), and I don't even do that shit.

T: How has it come to be that you don't even do that shit and yet your PO thinks you do? Do you think we should try and set the record straight and let him know how rap allows you to fight with your pen instead of your fists?

R: But he's going to give me that same old bullshit

about how I don't take responsibility and blah, blah, blah (uses his right hand to imitate a talking mouth).

T: Do you think if you rapped for him and let him know how rap can strangle the advances of anger and aggression he would look at you as more likely to keep your hands clean or less likely?

R: (Pauses for 10-15 seconds) More likely to keep my hands clean.

T: What do you think the consequences would be if we weren't to set the record straight?

R: Yeah, I get what you're saying now.

T: How do you mean?

R: Like, it's not enough for just me to come up with this plan if he still thinks about me a certain way... like a criminal.

T: Do you believe this is an opportunity for Ray The Philosopher to replace the other names that have been placed on you in the past like criminal?

R: Now that you mention it, yeah, I guess so.

T: Would you say that sometimes your PO is a tough nut to crack?

R: C'mon, now! That dude is like impossible to crack.

T: Do you think then that we might have to prove to him just how effective fighting with your pen can be?

R: Sure, but how the hell are we going to do that?

T: How long have you seen me for now, Ray?

R: (Pauses to think) Like about a month.

T: I know this is a tricky question because I'm asking you to guess what another person might be feeling, but do you have any sense for how your PO would say this last month has been for you.

R: I actually talked to him about this last week. I've been squeaky clean. Not one single issue, homie.

T: What do you think he would have told me about how things were going if I had talked to him prior to you coming to see me?

R: Man, he was always in my grill about shit saying I was defiant, I was going to go to jail, and this and that.

T: Fair to say then that he believes things are going better now?

R: No doubt.

T: Has one month been enough to convince him that you are on the right track?

R: Hell no! It's like he's just waiting for me to fuck up.

T: How many months do you think it might take to convince him that you are on the right track and ready to end your relationship with probation?

R: I mean, I still have over a year of this.

T: Do you think it will take all of that time to show him just how effective fighting with your pen can be?

R: Probably so.

T: What if we were to invite him in here, bring him up to speed on your philosophy of fighting with your pen and not your fists, and then make a commitment to this going forward?

R: I don't know if he'll believe it.

T: You make a good point. Like you've told me, he can be a bit stubborn and so can your grandmother! Even as tough as it is going to be, are you willing to fight with your pen and prove to your grandmother, your family, and your PO the true character of Ray

The Philosopher? You already have one-month under your belt!

Ray paused after my question. I started to wonder if perhaps my query had pushed him a bit too far. His face remained stoic as the silence continued beyond 30 seconds. Just as I started to ponder my next move fearing I had lost him, he replied, “I’m down (a hip-hop term voicing agreement).”

After the conclusion of our fourth session Ray and I agreed that it would be good to check in with his PO together. We decided that in addition to talking about the need for more sessions, we would also let his PO know (a signed release was already in place) about how Ray had been fighting with his pen instead of his fists. The PO acknowledged that things were going better the past month, but he remained skeptical. He agreed to get payment covered for half of every session for the next month. The way the following month was structured it would afford us five more weekly meetings.

Ray seemed somewhat relieved that more sessions had been granted but also a little bit ticked that his PO was still unconvinced. He felt his PO was “playing games” and “testing me.” Our next three meetings were spent wrestling with these feelings. Ray began discovering that restoring his reputation burned nearly as many calories as he was taking in. Instead of being

consumed by anger towards his PO, Ray stayed true to his word to fight with his pen. He remixed a song by the artist Common:

We should name the block poverty

That rock stole our humanity

You hear that glock pop?

For dough we perform bestiality

“Fucking each other over

What you expect they animals”

Then act like they the ones offended

When TMZ release the audio

If life’s a game

They withhold that playbook

But playas make that scratch

We get the itch

Run your shit

This a jook

Or a lick

See that's a stick-up if you down with my click

We starving in the darkness

Force upon us they man made eclipse

Is it a curse?

Mad poisons in our blood?

My pops tried to disinfect it

Chugging that rum

And I do the same (word?)

Like father like son.

Ray no longer waited for me to inquire about the lyrics. He would deconstruct them now almost as a natural part of our process. "See, this is what he (probation officer) doesn't understand. I was born behind the god damn eight-ball. No father. Poor. I've always had to hustle to survive. He doesn't know my pain. Does he even care to know it? But that don't even matter. Is he testing me? I'm going to pass that

test.”

Ray began rapping the second verse from this song:

To my reflection I scribed

What I be feeling inside

Can't leave it buried in the dirt

Gotta breathe it and give it life

My neighborhood taught us no self-control

*That boom-bap made us feel like it's our right to
explode*

No positive role-model

The hustlers were our fathers

Rappers instructed us to spit rhymes

And don't bother

With the life of an outlaw

It's a trick to keep us blind

And deny our title as God

Preventing our rise

They been doing this for centuries

Stolen lands from our North and South American fam

Jews burnt

Japanese thrown in detement camps

Hatred can hide

Right in front of our eyes

But I flipped that same hate

Used it as fuel to survive

I'm of a mind that believes love will conquer hate

They be seeing black and white

While my crew is dazed by all the gray

So gather around the fire

Light it up

Continue the cipher

Cause in the darkness of nights

Our stars still shine brighter

This is my dream!

T: Ray, are there two different stories in the two beats you have shared with me today?

R: Yeah, the first one is the pain and strife. The second is what happens when I look ahead and fight with my pen.

T: Pain and strife and fighting with your pen... both of those are rhymes that you brought into our work earlier, right?

R: Yep, Pharoahe Monch and Pac.

T: Would it be right to say then that these last two verses are a sort of remix of all of the beats we've heard in here so far?

R: Pretty much.

T: Would these verses be good to share with the folks who join us for our final celebration of the work you've accomplished in here?

R: Yeah, but I might throw in a couple of other verses

from different rhymes to get it just where I want it.

Our second to last session was a dress rehearsal. Ray came with the beats he wanted to perform and refined them. We also talked about how he wanted our final celebration to commence, what would happen, and who to invite. He joked that it “would be kind of like a block party, but where a therapist lives in the house on the corner.” We also decided that those in attendance would have an opportunity to voice their support of Ray’s efforts over the past two months as well as hopes and dreams for the future. As this session came to a close I could detect a nervousness that was following Ray.

T: Ray, I could be wrong here, but I am wondering if some nervousness is hanging with us right now.

R: Yeah, I guess so.

T: Do you mind if I ask you what kind of nervousness it is? People I’ve worked with before have taught me that there are different kinds? Do you know what I mean?

R: You know, I’m not like a professional rapper or anything like that, but I’ve performed in my neighborhood before. It feels like that. Like, you think you have a good rhyme, but you never know for sure until you get on stage and the crowd is feelin’ it.

T: What gives you confidence that the rhyme you have created in our work together will deliver just the message you hoped it would?

R: I put my whole heart and soul into it. I didn't leave one drop.

T: Do you think the people who are here with us next time will feel your heart and soul coming out through your lyrics?

R: (Pauses for 10 seconds or so) I really think so.

T: Do you remember when I first asked you about what would happen if you rapped for your grandmother or your probation officer?

R: Yeah, I said they wouldn't hear it.

T: Are you saying that you feel differently about that now?

R: Yeah, I guess so.

T: What would you say has shifted?

R: These rhymes are me but just in lyrical form.

T: And you don't believe your grandmother or those who love and care about you would reject this gift that

is a lyrical manifestation of you?

R: No, my grandmother always tells me that she'll never run out of love for me.

T: Hey, something just struck me, Ray. Would it be okay if I share it with you?

R: For sure.

T: I wonder if you just discovered the Magic Beats?

R: What do you mean?

T: Do you believe that when you create a rhyme that fully represents you and comes from the deepest depths of your soul that even those who don't prefer rap music could still hear it?

R: (A smile overwhelmed the now dwindling doubt on his face as he nodded affirmatively)

T: Ray! This is great! What an incredible discovery you have made!

Ray often tried to minimize any expressions of emotion, but even he smiled loudly at this development. In our excitement we almost instinctively exchanged high fives with our right hands before giving one another a quick hug. With this we

had established an unspoken agreement that we were ready for Ray's performance and celebration next week.

Ray and I agreed to meet about a half an hour before everyone else to prepare the room for the celebration. As we moved tables and chairs and geared up the laptop computer everything was coming together. "Alright, I think we've got it," I said looking in Ray's direction. He then shook his head no and looked upward to indicate to me to direct my gaze towards the ceiling. "What?" I said with a perplexed look. He nodded upward once more. I stared skyward still trying to decipher what Ray was communicating. Then I realized that in my haste to make sure there were enough chairs for everyone I had forgotten to hang up the marquee. Like a dog with his tail between his legs I went back to my desk in the back room and removed from the top drawer the "Ray The Philosopher" marquee. I dashed back out to the main office and hung it up in its customary location. "Now we got it," Ray asserted.

Soon, Ray's grandmother, his sister, and a few other people from his neighborhood began making their way into the office. There was a sort of nervous excitement that filled the room. Lost in conversation, time had escaped me. I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone to take a quick look at the time. In doing so I noticed a message was waiting for me

from Ray's probation officer. Oh no, I thought to myself. He had left me a message stating that something had come up and he wasn't going to be able to make it. Just as I was about to hold the phone to my ear to listen to it he lumbered through the front door. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "Did you get my message? I got caught up with a few things at the office."

Relieved that everyone was now here I looked at Ray to see if he was ready to go. Ray had asked that I start by saying a few words to give folks a sense of what today's meeting was all about. After welcoming everyone and thanking them for attending, I began discussing a bit about Ray's journey. "During our two months together Ray has reaffirmed how rap music can be an ally in helping him be the person he wants to be. He has composed a series of beats he would like to perform for you today. Ray suggested that it might be helpful after he finishes to talk some about each rap and how he finds it to be meaningful. I would like to invite each of you to stand alongside me in support of Ray's lyrical journey and the ways in which he has used it to fight back against the feelings and behaviors that aided in him ending up on probation. Without further adieu, I present to you Ray The Philosopher!"

I moved back and dimmed the lights just a bit as Ray had requested and off he went. After an initial stutter

brought about by nervousness, Ray seamlessly combined many of the lyrics that had been the backbone of our conversations for the last two months. What happened next, judging by Ray's reaction, certainly caught him by surprise. As he finished a verse that focused on fighting with his pen, tears started to roll down his grandmother's face. Once the rap concluded, Ray's eyes caught his grandmother's and he too began weeping.

"I never did understand," his grandmother said still crying. "I didn't get why this boy would listen to rap music and waste time rapping with his friends. I just didn't know."

I asked Ray if it would be okay if I asked his grandmother a few questions, and he nodded his assent.

T: I am so touched by your presence here today, Ma'am. Thank you so much for coming.

Grandmother: Thank you.

T: Would it be okay if I asked you a few questions on behalf of the work Ray and I have been involved with over the last two months.

G: Yes sir, of course.

T: What was it that you were able to hear today in Ray's raps that gives you confidence he will be able to end his relationship with probation?

G: I always knew this boy needed an outlet. I didn't realize that could be rap. (Begins crying) I wish I had known that!

T: Do you believe that if Ray continued to use rap to fight with his pen instead of his fists it could help him stay away from probation?

G: Yes sir.

T: Why do you think it might help him keep his distance from probation?

G: It helps him get his feelings out. I've always noticed with him that if his feelings get trapped in there, they explode later.

T: Ray told me that he believes you are the wisest person he has ever known. Did you hear any wisdom similar to the kind you gift to him in the raps he just performed?

G: I always tell him to think for himself. He doesn't have to follow what nobody else is doing. He has to be his own man. And I can see that in him now (begins crying). I understand what the rap is doing for

him now.

T: Ray, would it be okay if I asked you about what your grandmother has just said?

R: (Nods affirmatively)

T: What's it like to know that your grandmother understands how important rap music is to you and that she believes it can help you stay away from probation?

R: It feels really good, man. I feel like she accepts me. I know she loves me. I always knew that, but it's like she can see this new side of me that she couldn't before.

T: Do you think others might be starting to see this new side, too?

R: Yeah, I mean, I hope so.

T: Would it be alright if we asked if others are seeing it?

R: Yeah, go for it.

Silence took over the room. I knew I could always ask someone more specifically to speak, but my hope was that the process would emerge a bit more organically.

Perhaps if someone were to speak up without me specifically referencing them by name, this might lend even more support to Ray's reputation reclamation project. As the silence continued there was a palpable angst. The silence was finally broken by the somewhat clunky words of Ray's probation officer.

"Umm... you know... I have seen a change in Ray. He has made it to every appointment with me right on time. He is more responsible. When he first came, I don't think he took it seriously. It was like a big joke to him. I know he is really trying now."

One might be quick to conclude that such sentiment wasn't exactly a ringing endorsement. However, both Ray and I understood that his probation officer, a strict disciplinarian, rarely spoke in such terms. I quickly pounced on the opportunity, not wanting to let it slip away.

T: Do you believe Ray is more likely or less likely to continue his relationship with probation after what you have observed the last two months?

Probation Officer: I think that if he continues doing what he's doing, less likely.

T: What specifically makes you think it would be less likely he would continue his relationship with probation in the future?

PO: Ray's biggest problem has been anger management. He needed to get some different coping skills.

T: Ray has made a commitment to fight with his pen instead of his fists. Is this by chance what you mean when you say coping skills?

PO: Yes, anything that will keep him from getting into physical altercations of any kind.

T: Since Ray has been fighting with his pen these last two months have you noticed his behavior as behavior that would be more or less likely to lead to physical altercations?

PO: Less likely.

T: If Ray were to continue to fight with his pen for the

rest of probation, what do you think the outcome would be?

PO: Very positive. I think Ray can do whatever he wants with his life. He's a very smart young man.

Ray often plays his nonverbal communication fairly close to the vest, but I could see pride begin emanating from his face after hearing the words of his probation officer. After a few words from his sister and a few other people from his neighborhood, the energy in the room had changed to a more relieved and almost celebratory tone. Ray connected some speakers to my computer and we all listened to music and devoured some snacks.

As I glanced at the clock I noticed our time was running short. I quietly crept back to my desk to grab a gift I had gotten for Ray. Not wanting to create a large scene I made eye contact with him and gestured for him to come back to my desk. I handed him the present.

“What’s this?” Ray asked with a quizzical yet intrigued look. “Open it,” I said in an inviting tone. As he methodically removed the wrapping paper I waited in anticipation of Ray’s response. He opened the black box and inside laid a gold pen. Ray picked it up and examined the side where he found an inscription that read “Ray The Philosopher.”

“Would it be okay if I contributed this as a small way to stand in support of the many future battles you will fight?” Ray looked down at the pen for a few seconds before diverting his gaze back up towards me. “Thank you for everything,” he said before reaching out for an embrace. “It’s truly been my honor, Ray. Don’t be a stranger, okay brother?”

Ray successfully negotiated his remaining time on probation, which was a little under 14 months time. We had a couple of meetings during those 14 months per his request just to touch base. In our last meeting Ray informed that he was enrolling in college to study psychology with hopes of becoming a therapist.

Some six months later I found a piece of paper torn

from a buckslip that had been placed under my office door. It was the kind I knew Ray always used when he was writing. It read as follows:

They want me to fall. They wanna see if I make it. Got my back against the wall, put my head to the sky; No, I won't let 'em break me. I got great expectations.

Hope you are doing well, T. Keep doing your thing. You know I'm gonna keep doing mine.

R.T.P. (Ray The Philosopher)