

THE CORNER

DAVID EPSTON

SPITTING TRUTH FROM MY SOUL: A CASE STORY OF RAPPING, PROBATION, AND THE NARRATIVE PRACTICES PART II

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This is the second part of a two-part case story that focuses on a 24-year-old African American client named Ray who was referred to me (T.H.) by probation services. In this brief introduction I will try to summarize what transpired in Part I. Whenever possible, I will attempt to provide phrases or “pieces” of Ray’s language so the reader can begin to get a “feel” for him and our work. Part I can be read in *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, volume 34, number 3, pages 77–90.

Rap music was introduced as an entry point to our work. After our first session Ray could probably best be described as equal parts skeptical and intrigued. He enjoyed sharing rap songs that were meaningful to him as well as having the opportunity to create rhymes of his own. We rather quickly discussed ways in which rap music was misunderstood (“Adults throughout my whole life telling me it’s violent and the music of the devil . . .”) and how others could not or were not willing to hear the important messages that can be contained within certain songs. We proposed a pair of magic headphones (“Magic Beats”) as a way to help those who would not listen begin to hear rap’s message. This idea will prove particularly important as our conversations progress in Part II.

This case story represents a composite story with elements from a number of therapeutic conversations from multiple clients. The goal was to provide an accurate illustration of the author’s work while also maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

The rhymes used in this text are stand-ins for the originals, written by co-author Paulo Arroyo.

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As our first conversation continued we started exploring sociopolitical implications of rap music and hip-hop culture. We framed rap as a kind of philosophy (“But without all the white cats . . .”) that served as a voice for the voiceless. We also stumbled across a connection between Ray’s grandmother and rap music (“I’m rapping about the same s**t she’s saying but in my own way . . .”). This struck him as perplexing (“That’s crazy bro . . .”) and also enlightening (“I never thought of it like that . . .”) given the disdain she had expressed for rap music throughout his youth.

Our first meeting came to a close by having a conversation about our conversation. We explored the difference between just talking and rapping, to which Ray responded, “It’s like when I rhyme . . . I spit truth from my soul.” We both agreed that inviting rap to our future meetings would be of benefit. More specifically, we discovered that rapping might serve as a pathway to liberation (“Remove the shackles from my soul . . .”). I invited Ray to consider composing a rhyme that paints the part of the picture that probation services doesn’t see. He responded enthusiastically but seemingly nervous that probation services would discover the way were working and somehow veto it (“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?”). We then decided that calling our work together a “studio session” was a better fit than therapy.

Ray picked up in our second meeting directly where he left off in the first. He came prepared with a rhyme that would be the foundation of a counter-story. He noted in that rhyme the importance of challenging rules (“Just because these are the rules you play the game by doesn’t mean these are the only rules . . .”). The conversation evolved into looking at whether or not Ray had found some ways of challenging rules more effective than others. He then traced the relationship between rap and anger (“It’s like my anger would leave my mouth through my rhymes . . .”). Part I concluded with a pensive Ray searching for a rhyme that captured this most important function of rap music as an antidote to anger and aggression. The following rhyme picks up where our original story concluded:

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.

TRAVIS: What speaks to you in this verse?

RAY: 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: I 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 s**t 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.*¹ 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 s**t are built upon. It's like a scam for poor people. You know what I mean? I would have never thought about s**t 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 s**t. You ever watched TV at like 2:00 a.m.?

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 s**t 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 seven secrets that will make you rich. Order now!"

¹See Part I, *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 34(3), p. 88, for the entire verse.

(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 Beats² 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 working 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 okay sign with the finger and thumb on his right hand. I watched, often in awe, as Ray meticulously perfected his craft. He was locked in his element, and I was an enthusiastic fellow traveler.

"Nah, we need to change up that bass line 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.

²Imaginary headphones that would allow others to truly listen to and understand Ray; see Part I, *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 34(3), p. 80.

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 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 (PO) 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 s**t.

T: How has it come to be that you don't even do that s**t 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 bulls**t 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 I'm 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 s**t, 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 f**k 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 beastiality
"F**king 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 s**t
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 determent 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.

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 tweak them, 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 2 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 daps (gesture similar to a handshake) 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 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. "All right, 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 the "Ray the Philosopher" marquee from the top drawer. 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 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 2 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 led him to end up on probation. Without further ado, I present to you: Ray the Philosopher!"

I moved back and dimmed the lights just a little 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 past 2 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 past 2 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 all right 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 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 past 2 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 past 2 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 keeps 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 lay 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 less than 14 months. We had a couple of meetings during those 14 months per his request just to touch base. In our last meeting, Ray informed me that he was enrolling in college to study psychology with hopes of becoming a therapist.

Some 6 months later, I found a piece of paper torn from a buckslip (an extra long pad of paper) 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)

See Part I for a list of resources for using hip hop and rap in therapy with young people.