

# Sampling my Suitcase of Spoken Word

Antronette (Toni) Yancey 21 May 2012

The Gulf of Mexico disasters of 2005, replayed in 2010 in man-made form, brought into sharp focus and stark relief, for the entire world, the widening chasm between the "haves" and "have-nots" in the US. In American poet laureate Dana Gioia's classic essay on why the situation of poetry is of consequence to the entire intellectual community, he wrote, "A society whose intellectual leaders lose the skill to shape, appreciate, and understand the power of language will become the slaves of those who retain it—be they politicians, preachers, copywriters, or newscasters" (Gioia 2002, 17). As public health scholars and practitioners, our commitment to social justice, equality of opportunity, health enhancement and disparities elimination, locally and globally, infuses our work, and, for many, our activities during our discretionary time as well. Melding of messages delivered through scientific endeavor and poetic reflection may serve to inspire, direct and catalyze the social change needed to make progress toward these lofty, *and attainable*, goals and aspirations, to manifest then-Senator Barack Obama's fiery declaration in his 2004 Democratic Convention address of the "audacity of hope." As a capella women's music group Sweet Honey in the Rock

asserts in *Ella's Song*, "We who believe in freedom cannot rest...."

As public health professionals, we place disproportionate emphasis on the science driving the development of health interventions, and devote insufficient attention to the science of disseminating that knowledge to increase individual and societal adherence to healthy practices. Furthermore, most health decisions are emotionally and socially, versus intellectually or cognitively, driven! As resources inexorably constrict and need relentlessly grows, we must increase our efficiency by living our professional convictions—socially, economically, politically and spiritually, through the "scholarship" of engagement. As Gandhi asserted, "we must be the change we wish to see in the world." And we must marshal all of our talents, forces and resources, the seen and the "unseen."

My poetry, a mix of self-discovery, social commentary and health advocacy, with frequent use of sports as a metaphor, sometimes veers toward the political. But, of course, as a physician for over a quarter-century—of populations now, not individuals—health broadly defined (physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, financial) surfaces in most of my work. And basketball has become a coda for identification with black culture, as its visible and exquisite manifestation of excellence, assertion of dominance and channeling of anger and frustration symbolizes our hopes and dreams as a people. Especially at the intersection of race and gender, as in *We, Too, Are*

*Ballas.*

**...thriving, striving and deriving  
the last ounce of energy, determination  
frustration at *any* limitation!  
Engendering fearlessness  
in other arenas,  
in which ovaries  
give us competitive advantages  
over *cojones*.**

During the run-up to the 2008 election, President Barack Obama used his love of basketball to signal his blackness when some African Americans questioned his identity or cultural grounding. Basketball also supplies the “props” — assertion of insider status—to criticize our own. Like the all-too-common sexual risk-taking and early childbearing among young black people that bubbled up in *B-Ball Blues*.

**...These ballin' brothas  
Many, not all  
Plantin' babies  
'Thout committin'  
To the sistuhs  
Carryin' 'em...**

**Non-men  
Disingenuous *boys*  
Don't they know**

**That the anger  
Of those sistuhs  
Toward them  
Will be visited  
Upon their sons**

**These ballin' brothas  
Many, not all  
With so much talent  
Drive, discipline  
And sheer *power*  
Caught up in toys--  
Rides, Cribs,  
Threads,  
Boxes  
Rather than politics,  
Literature, spirituality,  
Education, health  
NBA is mo' letters  
'N most of 'em  
Can handle  
At one time...**

**These ballin' brothas  
Some, a few  
Are *men*...  
Who should be celebrated  
With Martin, Malcolm and Marcus...  
Not so much  
For this career**

**As for that**

**Which is sure**

**To follow**

I'd like to advance my *7 A's of Constructive Public Health Action*, against chronic disease, violence, social injustice and the many other threats to the health of our communities.

## **1. Activism**

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No, it didn't go out in the '60s. We need it as a way of channeling our righteous anger and frustration at a sociopolitical system hostile to the empowerment of women, older people, younger people, people of color, people who aren't affluent or Christian or heterosexual, people who didn't go to the "right" schools or don't live in the "right" neighborhoods. Rather than at ourselves through violence, substance use, depression, sexual risk-taking and ill-prepared childbearing. Let me emphasize that activism takes individual (e.g., letter-writing) and collective (e.g., organized protest) forms, creating moral and political imperatives. Finally, the Occupy movement in its outrage at escalating social inequality is matching the energy of the Tea Party!

My activism these days generally takes the form of intellectually challenging the status quo. In many

instances, it's no more than figuring out ways to scientifically document common sense observations that most people who inhabit non-affluent communities make daily. For example, we published a study several years ago examining the contribution of commercial advertising to obesity-related disparities and found, to no one's surprise, that schools and day care centers in low-income zip codes have many more ads for sugary beverages and fast food than those in wealthier zip codes (Hillier et al. 2009; Yancey et al. 2009). We also found similar distributions of ads for sedentary products and services, e.g., TV shows, films and cars. And ads promoting physical activity were nearly non-existent in any area. There were so few ads in affluent white communities that we had difficulty finding a zip code for inclusion. In a similarly conceived project, we quantified the amount of moderate to vigorous physical activity that kids get at school during PE—on average, 6-8 minutes during a 30-minute class and even less in low-resource schools (UCLA 2007). *For Lettin' Me Play* arises from my gratitude to those who opened the doors and provided the guidance, allowing me to "get in the game" of academic public health practice.

**Mos' times**

**They don' even let us**

**Get in the game**

**Don' let us**

**Showcase our wares**

**Tell us**

**We're weak**

**Crush**

**Our spirits**

**Deny**

**Our feistiness**

**Subjugate**

**Our vision**

**Scrutinize**

**Our style**

**Criticize**

**Our every move**

**Relegate us**

**To the sidelines**

**To cheer on**

**The *action***

**Under the guise of**

**Protectin' us**

**Can't run**

**'Less we get in the game**

**Can't score**

**'F we don' get the ball**

**Y'all made sure  
That didn' happen  
To *me***

## **2. Sociopolitical and Historical Awareness**

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People who do not understand the historical context of their current standing suffer their ignorance in lost collective self-esteem and pride in accomplishment. All of the great leaders of our communities, such as Susan B. Anthony, Angela Davis, Eleanor Roosevelt, Shirley Chisholm, Indira Gandhi and Barbara Jordan, have tried to address and influence our hedonism, materialism, consumerism, identification with the aggressor, competitive "crabs in a bucket" mentality and other destructive values we've foolishly embraced. Suffice it to say that people who don't know their history are destined to repeat its mistakes. *Ain' Like There's Hunger* speaks to many of these issues through the lens of the sociodemographic and environmental conditions underlying obesity disparities (Yancey 2007; Yancey et al. 2006; Yancey & Kumanyika 2007).

**Sweet tooth**

**Salt tooth**

**Chocolate tooth**

**Jonesin' for fries,**

Triple deck Mac,  
Coke and pork rinds  
But no walkin' tooth  
Swimmin' tooth...  
Weight liftin' tooth  
After all,  
Ain' like there's hunger...

Mind numbin' early gig  
Second gig even worse  
Kids in between  
Gotta be fed  
Read to  
Homework checked  
Ears inspected

Dark park?  
Cold out?  
After all,  
Ain' like there's hunger...

Sittin' all day  
Tryin' to look nice  
'Do costin' thirty, fo'ty  
Dollas a week  
Heels and huggin' skirt  
And these fifty extra pounds  
I'm carryin' around  
Stairs 're a joke!  
Walkin' at lunch?

**Humidity wreck my hair  
After all,  
Ain' like there's hunger...**

**So if bein' a nation  
Of couch potatoes  
Or "mouse" potatoes  
Is really that bad  
Why don't they  
Make it easy?  
Perk me up  
Since I'm usually down  
Where I work  
On the "company's" clock**

**Yeah, how 'bout a little recess?  
Like when we were  
Kids in school**

**I might take a stroll  
On "their" time!  
Or find some jammin' tunes  
For my little group  
Packin' some  
extra pounds  
Been awhile since we got down!  
"Shiftin' & movin' &  
swingin' & groovin'"  
Get that *natural high* flowin'  
Now that might make me hungry**

**For more!**

### **3. Advocacy**

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We all have some knowledge or power in some arena that can help somebody in need to help themselves, be it a relative, friend, patient, co-worker, neighbor or somebody we just run into in the grocery store. I somehow survived the most challenging advocacy project of my life—navigating the health care and social services bureaucracies to manage my mom's last decade of life. I wrote *She Went Away* out of the anguish of protracted loss imposed by Alzheimer's, and in celebration of a life well-lived.

**Alzheimer's**

**Steals**

**Robs**

**Takes**

**Drains**

**Eradicates**

**Insidiously**

**Assiduously**

**Unrelentingly**

**A knowing smile**

**An arched eyebrow**

**A "stop you in your tracks" stare**

**A hearty laugh**

**A nervous glance**

**A sarcastic chuckle**

**A made-up word**

**Good glugallywogallywomblebot!**

**1% here**

**2% there**

**She**

**Slipped out**

**Seeped through**

**Was spirited away**

**Like sweat through her pores**

**Like tears through her eyelashes**

**Like blood from her veins**

**Like milk from her breasts**

**Like saliva from her lips...**

**The memories**

**Of a life well lived**

**The pride**

**Of a life much appreciated**

**The confidence**

**Of a life much heralded**

**The dreams**

**Of a life lived vibrantly...**

**But not**

**The love  
Of a life well connected  
The *presence*  
Of a life lived reverently  
The hopes  
Of a life well anchored  
The satisfaction  
Of a life lived appreciatively...**

**At what point  
Has the *person*  
Seeped out  
Slipped through...  
The cracks  
The fissures  
The crevices  
The quakes  
The fault lines...**

**At what point  
Is the *person*  
No longer there?  
Behind the façade  
Of the vacant stare  
The hollow laugh  
The angry countenance  
The desperate clinging  
The empty smile  
The desolate look  
The crumbling features**

**The reedy voice**

**A Hollywood set**

**Windows without sashes**

**Streets without gutters**

**Lawns without sprinklers**

**Chimneys without flues**

**Rain without clouds**

**Snow without frost**

**Grass without dew**

**Houses without foundations**

**When is a life**

**No longer worth living?**

**On some level**

**She knew**

**And she left**

**And she spared me**

**An Alzheimer's death**

## **4. Physical Activity**

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Sedentariness, suboptimal nutrition, smoking and other substance misuse, and high-risk sexual activity account for most chronic disease risk and disparities, including the high blood pressure and diabetes leading to most of the need for organ transplantation. And there is a "multiplier effect" of preventive practices by health care providers

and other opinion leaders and gatekeepers. *Recapturing Recess* corrals a bit of the energy and exuberance we've lost touch with, helping to frame physical activity as something people want, not just something we think they need, as our studies of Instant Recess® demonstrate (Yancey 2010; Barr-Anderson et al. 2011; Maxwell et al. 2011; Whitt-Glover et al. 2011).

**Now I know**

**Y'all can remember**

**The recess bell**

**The wave of exhilaration**

**The sigh of relief**

**The sheer release**

**The transformation**

**Of fidgeting**

**Into linear motion**

**Raise up your hands**

**If you can remember**

**All that pent-up energy**

**Exploding**

**Into air and space**

**Leaping**

**Into wind and sunshine**

**Launching**

**Onto grass and hardwood**

**Soaring**

**Into goals and hoops**

**And if you can recapture**

**Even a little of the joy**

**Of unbridled movement**

**Then just maybe there's hope**

**For the couch potatoes!**

**Those of you too worn down even to fidget!...**

## **5. Spiritual Attunement**

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Spirituality has offered respite and rejuvenation throughout the millennia in the struggle against oppression and inequity. *Speaking Truth to Power* testifies to my core beliefs, with a nod of support to Anita Hill, as it was written during the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings.

**Thanks, Cornel**

**And Samuel...**

**And Daddy**

**For remindin' me**

**That love's**

**What it's all about...**

**I can't win at hate**

**'Cause the devil's**

**Too fickle a master**

**Got no integrity**

**'S soon stab you in the back**

**'S look ya in the eye**

**I'm on God's side**

**I was born in faith**

**My folks'**

**And my people's**

**And in faith**

**I shall live or die**

**But not waver**

**I shall speak truth to power**

**With *love***

**Stan' for somethin'**

**Not fall for nothin'**

**Truly live**

**And when I become**

**Too much of a threat**

**Fall *for somethin'***

**Because this mortal life**

**Is such a small part**

**Of our eternity**

**And recognizing only**

**One Higher Authority**

**Makes life so much simpler**

**And more easily *relinquished***

## **6. Altruism**

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A reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* introduced his article about a local drive to recruit bone marrow donors a few days before Christmas in 1992, (Kanaley 1992) writing, "As the line of children snaked toward Santa, and city shoppers shouldered their way between chain stores, an occasional hero slipped into a white tent in the Gallery yesterday to get stuck with a needle and have a teaspoon of blood drawn. 'Do I get paid for that?' inquired Tyrone Lucas, 19, of South Philadelphia, as he hesitated at the entrance of the tent set up by the city health department. The answer was no. But Lucas went in anyway. 'It was all right,' he said a few minutes later. 'I feel good to be into something.'" I've heard people who actually donated marrow say that the "high" lasted a year or two. This speaks to the connectedness that we need for grounding and well-being. And that brings me to a poem near and dear to my heart that speaks to the research interest that brought me into public health, namely role modeling. In order to move our lives in the direction we envision, we need to exchange a lot of *Currency*, beyond just the flow of dollars.

**I gave Akil**

**The spot I earned**

**In a pick-up game**

**You know, b-ball**

**To a kid**

**That's like money**

**Currency**

**... I gave Robyn**

**A heartfelt compliment**

**Told her**

**She's the best**

**Student I've known**

**To a kid**

**That's like money**

**Currency**

**Akil gave me**

**An ego boost**

**Told some other folk**

**I taught him to play**

**You know, b-ball**

**To me**

**That's like money**

**Currency**

**Robyn gave me**

**The ultimate gift**

**Told my aunts**

**She wanted to be**

**A model/doctor**

**Just like "Aunt Toni"**

**To me**

**That's like money**

**Currency**

**All that currency  
Exchanged between us  
And nobody  
Spent a dime!**

That poem was inspired by a particular pick-up basketball game in a park here 10 years ago that I sat out while my godson played in my place. It was a bit like watching the Michael Jordan of the '90s raise his game at will in the last few minutes of a tight contest, which reminds me of the incredible empowerment associated with a powerful mentor communicating a belief in you. Sometimes that empowerment occurs through no personal communication at all, but by our choice of a powerful other as a role model, most often with whom we share sociodemographic similarities, like gender and ethnicity. We've been able to demonstrate this positive association between role modeling and healthy outcomes in studies of Los Angeles County and California adolescents (Yancey et al. 2002; Mistry et al. 2009; Yancey et al. 2011). I believe that the provision of a diversity of images of powerful others, self-efficacious others, is critical in addressing racial/ethnic health disparities.

## **7. Authenticity**

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To understand who we are, we must understand our past, not only individually, but collectively—our “ancestral

capital." Is a poetic voice hereditary? Perhaps the facility with language, agility of intellect, *reality* of memory, and lability of mood are. But the talent's the small part of the poetic *spirit*. The drive, determination, dedication and discipline to seek our mission, follow our passion, and live our prayer are wholly a function of the role models and mentors whose paths we cross or who cross ours.

My aunt, Antronette (Toni) Hall Brown, was one of my first role models, and my mother named me after her. She earned her B.A. in English from the University of Kansas in 1938 and her M.Ed. from Columbia University in 1956, after 6 summers of commuting to New York from Kansas City by car. She was a pioneer in the development of adult basic education in promoting literacy. She wrote "A Perfect Day" as a college freshman, and it was published in the newspaper of her former Kansas City, KS high school 75 years ago. She died five years ago at age 90, but her spirit lives on and her work is carried on by the minions of us she inspired. She, indeed, lived...

## **A Perfect Day**

**God, give me strength to face this  
day**

**The obstacles that block my way,  
Take Thou hand and lead me to  
The things that make me more like  
You.**

**Show me a deed, lead me apart**

**To bring happiness to some sad heart,  
Fill my odd hours with all that's true  
Pleasure and labor – the whole day  
through.**

**Thus may my day be pure and**

**Bright;**

**Teach me to know the wrong from  
right**

**And when shadows fall, I want to**

**Say**

**That I have lived a perfect day.**

I wrote this tribute to Toni, capturing not only my sense of loss, but also the focus of our family values on inter-generational investment in public service.

**We Are One...Continuum: a river nourishing the world**

**...I looked into the soul of my future today**

**And of my past**

**What's in a name?**

**The power to shape**

**Mold, sculpt**

**Subliminally**

**Conscientiously**

**But not entirely**

**Consciously**

**Communication of a dream**

**Born not long after**

**The birth of the dreamer**

**I looked into the spirit of my future today  
And of my past  
A bright courageous future  
Spanning many years  
Of personal satisfaction  
Human interaction  
Scientific recognition  
And public reaction  
A future  
That she  
And they  
Fostered  
And foreshadowed.**

**Only she won't be there.  
And she's the only one left.**

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