the 1st time i really talked with him, he was yelling at me. it was his first year coaching at Louder Than A Bomb and his Umjoa Manley all-boys Flipside team’s first year as well. they lost. badly. a group of 8th graders scored higher than them. Joe was pissed. after the bout he came to me demanding an explanation, justice, retribution, a ribbon, something for his students who worked hard and never won anything. he said the system was unfair, it should be equitable, why was there so much emphasis on competition? at this point in his dissertation, Joe was no longer talking about the slam.

Joe knew there was something wrong.

over the last 6 or so years he built a powerhouse of a poetry program at Umjoa Manley on the west side in the same neighborhood my Bubbe’s family immigrated to from Poland. a neighborhood most Jews had long left except Joe and some staff at Umoja. when i talk about Louder Than A Bomb to teachers, funders, CPS Administrators i talk about how this form of spoken word and hip-hop poetry has the ability to transform the culture of a school. it can take hyper-literate student poets and elevate their social status to that of a star athlete, when i say this i am talking about Joe. about the hours and hours and days and lifetime of ridiculous freestyles and mindful critique and being a father figure to kids who never had one and brother and many times over the only man and white man students at Manley and across the city ever had the chance to see a whole and holy person in care and kindness, Joe is a tzadik a part time rabbi to a mixed congregation able to mix Freire and Biggie in the same pedagogical sermon.

the last time we met we spoke about a book Joe was writing highlighting the hip-hop praxis of various community organizations in Chicago. a man whose light was the brightest in the room was constantly giving shine to others. this is what it means to be magnanimous, a selfless servant of the people his presence a mirror of our future selves what he thought and hoped and knew we could be he would push us toward. he saw the best in his students and peers not cuz he was not bothered by our shortcomings he was not immune to our shadow selves he was not blinded to the constant barrage of injustice and dehumanizing state agents in the lives of his students he was wide-eyed and aware.

Joe knew something was wrong.

why else does an Ivy educated Jewish PHD from Evanston spend so much time scouring the notebooks and journals of 16 year olds in North Lawndale, kicking freestyles at Polk and Sacramento to let his students know it is scary and fun to put your creation into the world and if you mess up, stay flowing...

Joe knew something was wrong.

knew for a long time, a lifetime feeling the all weight of what he knew he knew his north shore suburban education should extend, not depend on which tax base you were born into, knew that when kids are engaged fully as intelligent beings they will excite and exceed and disap-point regardless of what music they listen to or what neighborhood they live in.

Joe knew there was something wrong.

something wrong with his student’s rising body count something wrong with the perpetual violence threatening their walk home something wrong with the gangs and police and sometimes home itself something wrong with how the country stalked and tracked and warred against bodies of the youthful and colorful.

Joe knew there was something wrong with this world and the world at large He knew the threat of violence was the same for young folks on the west side as it is on the west bank and Joe and I, both jews, talked about the madness of police states and the privilege to walk freely to a family dinner or corner store, across borders and Joe lived between borders engaged in the practice of tikkun olam repairing this world yes, but better put from Joe’s labor, putting the fractured and seemingly disparate pieces of the whole together.

Joe was a connector a bridge between the academy and the block the north shore and north lawndale a synthesis of theory and practice the grit and presence of everyday labor cuz Joe showed up in your life his body warm and graspable his smile and spirit infectious his existence a mountain to climb toward the worlds he saw in you.
Joe was necessary friend and colleague Idris Goodwin told me today and there is something wrong with today cuz Joe's not here not leaving me messages like he did on July 2 asking how he can help with Brave New Voices and how excited he was for the 10th year of Louder Than A Bomb and the book and there is something wrong with today because we have lost a soldier on the front lines of the classroom, in the community at the administrative offices of institutions where he fought for the integrity of people on the people's side of justice a fighter, like his son Rocky, for those sometimes unable to make it into the ring there is something wrong with today and there will be something wrong with tomorrow but the energy and chutzpah and drive to work hard for what must be, lives to achieve more and better in our lives and in the lives of all to right this world to maintain and build upon Joe's tireless labor, his legacy his ferocity to love to throw ourselves fully and furiously into our lives and the lives of others to have the knowledge that there is something terribly wrong and yet commit ourselves gorgeously and gigantically and courageously into the project of making it better