



# **JOURNAL OF ORDINARY THOUGHT**

## **Ask Me!**

### **Winter 2009**

JOT writers Asking Questions and Generating Answers.

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### **Introduction**

One of my favorite things about Chicago is riding the bus. I think it's one of the truest democratic spaces left that we share as a diverse people traversing neighborhoods, catching conversations, and passing in real-time together. Some of us get so used to doing things our own way, in our own social and class circles stratified by neighborhoods, schools, and the American grind, that we sometimes forget the value of sharing public space together.

Riding the bus reminds me of the realities of a city, of the people raising questions as if the authors of this compilation were riders on the #82 Kimball bus, writing their thoughts and experiences in poetry and prose. Edmee Cappas Velez, a teacher, shares the challenges of working in an underresourced public school system, and Phyllis Roker wonders why racism still exists. Don't we all share similar hardships? Civil rights advancement, the Equal Employment Act, affirmative action, the Community Reinvestment Act, anti-racial, and sexual orientation discrimination policies, to name a few, have led us to think that we've made strides in reducing the wage gap and inequality. But "fat cats [still] sail off into the sunset," reminds writer Barbara Banks.

We, America, are entering the New Year in the worst economic times since the 1930s. We feel it at the grocery store. We feel it in order to ride the bus, check a bag on an airplane, or mail a letter (all public services have been, or will be, increasing their fees in 2009). When the services we value and consider public goods become costly, it means our cities and states are going bankrupt. Instead of raising income taxes or other methods of fair taxation, officials increase public service fees and sales, cigarette, or casino taxes, which burdens the lower, working, and middle income people.

We feel it all over. Cars become refuge—symbols of privilege and choice, not only in Esther Jones' words ("what freedom means/in a nutshell the means/to go where you know/without a car you/can't go"), but by encouraging material possession, convenience, competition, and social alienation. "We think we can have everything. We've been blinded by the bling," writes Donna Pecore.

Indeed, we have been sold the American Dream. Many are out of pocket change and literally, out of house. Due to the sub-prime mortgage crisis, blacks in particular are in danger of losing between \$71 billion and \$92 billion of wealth<sup>1</sup>. Taking into consideration that the median household net worth for blacks in 2004 was \$11,800 compared to \$118,300 for whites<sup>2</sup>, we're talking about a loss to wealth that was barely there to begin with.

As we celebrate the election of Barack Obama and cringe at the casino gambling game players on Wall Street and in our own IL state government, it is pertinent and timely to think hard about what democracy means for us. What is at stake if we ask critical questions about the decisions being made, about the world around us, about what we see, hear, and are taught everyday? Are we encouraged to think independently and challenge dominant culture? Not typically, not in most public schools. Not in this media-savvy, bombardment era. Not unless you possess some form of privilege or access. pj humphries wonders,

*Do I have the protection of freedom  
of speech, right here, right now?  
May I air my discontent with this  
System of Democracy . . .*

It's a slippery slope, this form of government we claim to have and are told we have. If we live in a democracy, "why is that most of the change that takes place always never happens for the poor people of this country?" asks John D. Hall. Good question. "We spend too much time on the symptoms and not enough on the problems," writes Lamel Washington, summing up the real issue.

Despite the injustices posed and punctuated in these pages, there is a fierce outpouring of resiliency, independence, and hope for the human spirit. Echoing the ideals of a democratic society—freedom, opportunity, perseverance, and voice—there is also a call to rethink our common purpose and vision for a better world. Tom Havey believes it is about maintaining balance in our lives; Norma Mateo believes it is within self-determination and cultural pride that we thrive. Isn't it also about returning to the basics, finding pleasure and sustenance in simplicity and community? Your neighborhood bank is not the bank that is going out of business. It's time to reconnect with resources in close proximity, and with one another.

But how do we re-articulate common goals and dreams for a shared citizenry where all families are entitled a quality education, well-funded public transportation systems, universal healthcare, and a prospering workforce that ensures a living wage?

It will happen when we acknowledge wealth and poverty are interconnected, as two sides of the same coin.

It will happen when we see each other's issues as the same, most pressing issue of the day.

It will happen, as Evelyn Johnson believes, when everyone watches every child on the block, to make sure they stay out of harm's way.

It will happen when the "us" (of the "us vs. them") mobilize an uprising in order to get a seat at the table.

It will happen when, under a uniform frame - fighting for fairness, equality and democracy - we come together.

*Kristen Cox*

[Here is a collage poem Kristen wrote, comprised of lines from different pieces in "Ask Me!," plus one of her own.](#)

## **DON'T YOU KNOW EVERYBODY GOT ISSUES?**

**Sandra Gildersleeve Freeman**

I know you got issues, man, but don't you know everybody got issues? You come complaining about the job as if you think I got it made in a fourteen-room house with a demanding 2-year-old who already knows she is a queen. You think it's been easy for me to have to leave my job, a place of work I felt was challenging, because of medical reasons and be a stay-at-home mom? It's a position for which I feel my family doesn't even appreciate me, most of the time. I slave tirelessly each and every day, picking up everybody's items everywhere, all over the entire house. I cook fresh, healthy meals each and every day. I wash dishes at least three times a day. I make up beds. I try to balance the bankbook from a tightly fixed income. I shop for food, clothes, the household items. It's not just shopping, but shopping so that everybody is satisfied. Do you think this is easy? Do you think this house was made into a home overnight?

Don't you know I realize the neighborhood is becoming more dangerous, especially for our bright, beautiful, well-mannered son, and I'm stressed with fear for him? Don't you know I cry an abundant river every time he leaves this house because I'm scared he won't be coming back again? Because it might just be his luck to be caught up in a gang crossfire, or he might really get beaten to death because he chooses not to be a part of teenage violence in the hood? Oh, what am I to do? A mother who is medically, mentally, sometimes spiritually, and often economically depressed? Yeah, I got issues and I know you got issues! Man, don't you know everybody got issues? I'm just saying, Honey, can't you come home sometimes and say that you love me?

## **HERE'S SOME QUESTIONS FOR YA**

**Daryl Ford**

What makes the world turn?  
How are we able to see through our eyes?  
Why are rich people unhappy?  
Why was I born and for what purpose?  
Is there really a god?  
Are there people thinking and doing  
the same thing I am right now?  
Why is there an aging process?

## **ELLEN JOHNSON-SIRLEAF, LADY OF LIBERIA**

**Jeanne Mayer**

Tall, elegant  
A powerful figure  
African clothing of  
Abstract patterns and earth colors  
Drapes her regal Rubenesque frame  
Wraps her stately head.  
Hot sandy beach of Monrovia  
Under a shade tree heavy with bananas  
Sun trickles through palm fronds  
Cool breeze rustles garden ornaments  
Gurgling water streams from the fountain  
Serves up menthol mists of serene beauty.  
How is it possible to produce a leader such as you

African woman from a country of former slaves  
Freed from colonial American, women  
Once treated as the lowest of the low  
Lady of Liberia, now "land of the free"?  
Why would you want to be the first  
President of a state, the first in all Africa  
When with your intellect  
When with your talents you could indulge  
In greater wealth and power with diamonds and gold?  
Thoughtfully she gazes toward the glitter  
Of sun on the waves in the fountain  
Her broad smile and gleaming eyes  
Stare at the palm trees, searching for an answer.  
No reply comes from her sweet lips  
Only the eternal question  
"Why would a woman  
Re-enslave herself  
In the valley of money  
Of greedy power when  
She can touch  
The heights  
Where goddesses  
Thrive?"