

The Sayings Of Nan Hill



For Asafo



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A Collection of Writings and Musings
By Sandra Hill

Introduction

Thirty-eight years ago, at the urging of a family friend, a woman walked into the visiting room of a juvenile facility. She was checking in on a young man she did not know and in some ways she never left.

Sandra Hill has spent decades walking side-by-side with her adopted godson Asafo as if he was her own flesh and blood. She followed him when he was sent to state prison at the beginning of the age of mass incarceration. She followed him further, from prison to prison, as a carceral constellation was constructed across the mountains and hinterlands of Pennsylvania. She wrote him letters and offered her ear. She spoke out for him when his voice was muffled by agents of the state or geographic distance. Before there was much of a movement against mass human caging, she smuggled his words out of prison and spread them among her grandsons and the broader community.

So it was only natural that when people started to get organized, she connected with them right away. In groups such as the Human Rights Coalition and Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration, she found kindred spirits, and she brought something to share: her words. I like to call her our metaphor master. With a turn of phrase and some visually rich language, she often gets those of us in the movement to pause and think more deeply about

what is being discussed. Sometimes she deploys those words against our opponents. After the Department of Corrections stopped allowing mail directly into prisons and instead scanned and printed out copies to give to incarcerated people, Sandra and others in the Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration jumped into action to fight for the rights of people who are incarcerated. I will never forget when she walked up to Governor Wolf at a political fundraiser and went to shake his hand, looking deeply into his eyes. ‘Can you scan a tear?’ she asked him, referencing the mail scanning policy. Silence, but you could tell the words had touched him. Not much later, after a protest, he invited us to sit down and meet with him directly at the Capitol. Of course Sandra Hill was there, wearing a shirt with Asafo’s face on it, so his presence could be channeled into the room. We didn’t win on the mail, but we won on other things like stopping a book ban and ending a horrible policy that allowed family members to be indefinitely banned from visits based on a notoriously faulty drug testing device. Struggle changes everything. Sometimes words change the course of history.

In our movements, people bring all sorts of gifts, but mostly they develop their talents with each other. Some people have never spoken publicly, but at some point are called on by the group and become moving public orators. Others sharpen their intellect and hone their gut instincts to craft strategies to advance the movement’s aims.

Sandra has cultivated her wisdom and her words – a gift to all of us . In doing so, she has helped to build our community in the process. Once called CADBI’s poet laureate, she embodies us when we are at our most thoughtful. Her fight for those behind the walls and her decades long journey with Asafo exemplifies us when we are at our most caring and steadfast.

Sandra knows that the struggle is a long journey. In this slim volume, she has given us fuel for the road ahead. Place it in your back pocket. Open it and read it straight through or flip to a page and see if it speaks to you. We hope that it brings a smile to your face and – when the winds are whipping –warmth and determination. As Sandra says “Can you believe where you are at, you won’t always be?”

-Sean Damon
Director of Strategic Partnerships
Straight Ahead

Our Struggle



Pharaohs in the 21st Century. They go by different names, but rule with an iron fist. They are oblivious of the pain and suffering and oppression of a people with no means of escape. In the meantime the Pharaohs enjoy the opulence of their kingdom and feast on foods that's pleasing to the pallet. Pompous, arrogant and self assured as though they answer to no one. They are a God to themselves ...but little do the Pharaohs realize the people's cries are being heard. We cry for the men and women bound behind prison walls.

The oppressed men and women are housed and hidden behind immaculate well kept lawns in a house of horrors while the gatekeepers take pleasure in torturing . The Benz replaced the chariots, condos stand where the palace stood and asphalt replaced the roads made of dirt. Guns replace the swords. Prison yards replace the colosseum where they watched in glee and took pleasure in watching fights until death. The sadistic nature of that today still embodies the minds and spirits of the Pharaohs of the 20 Century.

But now comes a plague on the household of the Pharaohs.

From those cries of the oppressed that was heard
We are seeing a multitude of new Moseses In the 21st Century

Raised up for this cause to deliver justice and hope...the faith

One day to watch knowing the red sea will part and we will
all pass through on the dry land of freedom

Consider the weight class of your opponent
And train yourself accordingly

You can win only when you can go the rounds it takes to
do so

Department of Corrections mail is now sent to Florida to
be scanned under the ruse that drugs were being smug-
gled in and people who are incarcerated now only get a
printed out copy of their mail
the tears that fall from a love one's eyes as they pen a
letter

tell me

can you scan a tear?

will you hang onto the rope until it becomes a thread?

never give up!

Be free from
the eyes that accuse and the lips that condemn

MANY Scholars are hidden behind barbed wire fences and high cement walls of a prison compound

do you see yourself?
it could have just as easily been you and not them

think about it!

prison brown is never the reason for a smile
a visit or a kind word is

those of you returning to the free world
someone loved you out
love never gave up
I say even when many of you gave up, someone's love for
you never did
it's only because of that kind of love that many are free
today
let us not forget the ones you left behind
we want my love and your love to free them also
LOVE WILL NEVER GIVE UP
Its partners are mercy and forgiveness
you can't exist without them
And in this lifetime
if you live long enough you will need all three
you will need love, mercy and forgiveness
many refuse to give what they think they will never need
realizing we all need a second chance.

is it criminal to love someone incarcerated or convicted of any crime? the system would have you believe it is criminal.

if love is a crime with a show of hands, who will plead guilty?

the smell of hopelessness
that's the aroma that meet men and women every day
behind the prison walls
it's a smell not easily forgotten
it is distinctive
the smell is everywhere it's even on you...
if you believe that it is!

solitary
alone but not alone
the voices that scream day and night
trying to get out
no help in sight
torment
that's not meant for me
why?
because it wasn't me
because some things are just too painful

solitary
open grave
buried alive
they throw you in alive only to emerge dead
dead with the absence of ever being able to live or feel
again
what is that?
now why do I still exist?
If I'm doomed to be as they are
without feelings
the ones who put me in this grave (solitary)
little do they realize that could very well be their fate one
day
you can never tell
because the grave is still open

faces frozen in sadness
we should never
underestimate the persistence of those determined to keep
you incarcerated to watch you die slowly behind prison
walls
look at those who have languish behind the walls innocent
now look at those that have taken responsibility for their
crimes
that's all the more reasons they should show mercy
if the system had turned a deaf ear to those who were
wrongly convicted
how much more do they turn a deaf ear to the ones who
those who have remorse for the crime they have
committed

Take a moment of silence for the fallen comrades who transition while in the struggle!

For those who were granted commutation or a resentencing we send our blessings for a safe exit into the free world.

We welcome all

We need you to stand with us until we bring them all home

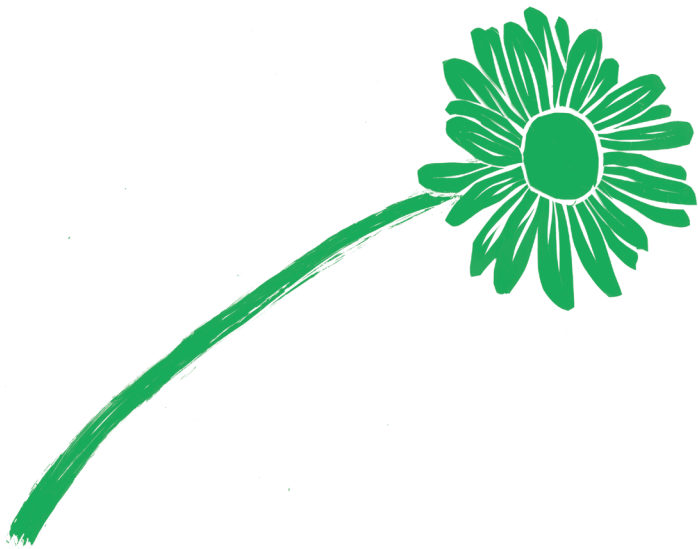
To those who don't believe in second chances
I wonder one day will you find yourself in the need of a
walkie?

when I saw him
I saw me
If you look again
you might see you

when God has already forgiven you
can you forgive yourself?

watch that what you try and conquer don't conquer you!

Our Lives



can you believe
where you are at
you won't always be?

what will you do when you find the only one in your way is
you?
when you move out of the way?
only then will they find your way

when you yourself don't understand
why do you think someone else will?

when you look in a mirror can you really see the real you
or just a reflection?

did you hope for it ?
then hope it happens today!

I WILL
I CAN
I WON'T GIVE UP

after you been through enough hell you will look for
heaven

consider what you are planting
what you plant will grow.

a tree is appreciated when you need shade from the sun

people are not enemies people are lessons

if you don't give much thought for how other people feel,
you probably won't spend much time considering how
your behavior hurt them.

do you really think there's not a heart or can you not touch it?

you can't touch a heart where there is none

amazing the ones that didn't ask about you
now begin to ask for you

some people have what they believe you want
only to find later that you have what they need

tears can speak
tears say what you can't
and can only be understood by the one who can hear them
while others just see them!!!

why do you keep picking up what had kept you going
down?

when you look at the road ahead
and it seems so far away
turn around, look back and see how far you came
than it won't seem so far after all

there are some scars woven so deep in a soul it would take
a lifetime to untangle if even then
a life shattered is harder to piece back together
than one broken
love and forgiveness is what will cover every earthly fault

until the nature of someone changes and they don't know
what to do
they will do what they know

show me you
then show me your company
then I will tell you who you are

what's understood
don't need to be explained

guilt is like pain
It won't let you rest

some things speak for themselves while other things are
hidden at first glance

apologies are not matched up
if it comes with an excuse
apologies come with ownership when someone hold you
accountable doesn't make them a hater
repentance means a change of behavior
thoughts and actions
thoughts become words
words become actions
actions become character

it is not what you are called but what you will answer to
can god bless that?!
watch him
god
alone can take the pain out of your shame

remember when
in the neighborhood where
everybody on the block you said was your cousin
where enemies became friends
you shared
kept secrets
stole from the corner store
hooky school
was scared the last day of school because rosetta wanted
to fight you
got teased if you had short hair
too fat
too skinny
picked on because they would say she think she's cute
never did your homework
changed the E written in red covered it to blue B on your
report card
got backhanded slap in the mouth for telling a lie when
you was told to always tell the truth you won't get a beat-
ing
wasn't allowed to say, they lying, had to say they storying .
you and your homeboy fought shook hands then had a
cold one together
the guys harmonizing singing Do Wop on the corner
knew everybody on the block that ran the speakeasy
Mr. Bill was the number runner
you had better hold a hand to cross the street
when you got slapped if you licked your plate
If you fixed your plate you better eat every drop

you was only allowed to eat one apple
you was greedy if you asked for another one
your eyes are bigger than you stomach
had to wash your hands before you ate
don't go in my pot if you didn't wash your hands
had to say your grace don't forget to say your prayers
had 5 store front churches in the neighborhood
had the neighbor that went to church prayed for you be-
cause she cared
and another nosey one that knew everybody business and
told it
had school clothes, church clothes, play clothes and shoes
had to change your clothes when you got out of school
lit your mothers cigarette on the stove that's how you
learn to smoke
was that really your uncle or your mothers boyfriend
you couldn't ask a grownup for money
they would ask you where you get that money from
you learned kids had to be seen and not heard
you better not talk under your breath
you couldn't tell nobody what you got for Xmas
you couldn't ask Why ?
if your mother called you , you couldn't answer, what goes
on in my house stays in this house rule
you had to knock if a door was closed, you didn't bust in
it was no summer camp
water plug was where you cooled off
Girls played jacks, jumping rope, polished fingernails on
the front steps, plaited each others hair

boys played stick ball
or tops or was talking to the girls
ole heads
played checkers, dominos, shot crap, played pool
selling parties was weekends celebrated, playing cards
pinochle poker spades, 500 Tunk, music playing on the
record machine. main players was always drunk but you
had somebody looked out for you

remember when?
that isn't now



Get Involved:

Coalition to Abolish Death By Incarceration: CAD-BI is a grassroots campaign to end life without parole (also known as death by incarceration) led by family members of the incarcerated, formerly incarcerated people and their supporters. They meet the third Wednesday of every month at 6 PM at 123 S. 51st St Philadelphia, PA. For more information: cadbiphilly@gmail.com or (267) 606-0324

Human Rights Coalition: The Human Rights Coalition is a group of incarcerated people, formerly incarcerated people, and their family members and supporters who fight for prisoners' rights and lives. HRC meetings take place the 2nd Wednesday of each month at 316 N 42nd Street Philadelphia, PA. For more information: info@hrcoalition.org

Inside/Outside Letter Writing: Every month Abolitionist Law Center, Philly Muslim Bail Fund and Human Rights Coalition host an in-person letter writing to incarcerated people in Pennsylvania. No experience necessary. It takes place at the Writers Room at Drexel at 229 N. 34th St. Philadelphia, PA on the third Thursday of every month from 6-8 PM.

Treatment Not Trauma Coalition: A coalition led by social workers, community members and Amistad Law Project that is working to win non-police responses from the city for people in mental health crisis in Philadelphia. Learn more and find out how to get involved here: <https://www.tntnow.org/join>

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