

On trusting your voice



Poet Nikki Giovanni on the importance of understanding history, enjoying and appreciating your own work, embracing contradictions, and why you should always have a pen handy.

February 2, 2024 - The poet Nikki Giovanni is a seven-time NAACP Image Award winner and the first recipient of the Rosa Parks Woman of Courage Award. She holds the Langston Hughes Medal for Outstanding Poetry, among other honors. The author of 28 books and a Grammy nominee for *The Nikki Giovanni Poetry Collection*, she is the University Distinguished Professor of English at Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Virginia.

As told to Amy Rose Spiegel, 2539 words.

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You've written that you grew up with your mother's library, reading Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. When you began to choose books on your own, what were you drawn to?

I love and I always have loved history books. I love the history. So, I read Mommy's, which also contained a lot of history, but I also read Charles Darwin, and I was interested in the development of the Constitution. It seemed like, "This is something we ought to know." I grew up thinking, "I'll be a lawyer." If you grew up admiring those kinds of things, you're going to end up looking at the world a little differently.

Your poems acknowledge complicated histories as part of sensuality, as part of dreaming, as part of topics that are seen as more emotive. How do you think about contextualizing, or adding that history, within your process?

What I'm always trying to look at is, "Did this really happen, and who was saying that it did happen?" That fool for the President who talks about fake news—he's been the liar, because when we look at what the United States has stood for, we cannot ignore the people who came here, whether they wanted to or not—whether they were the enslaved, who were brought over here against their will, or whether they are immigrants coming from Syria, Afghanistan, or [other] places of war. Look at World War II. And you look at the people who tried to come over, and the United States turned the Jewish people down, because we didn't want them.

So when you hear, "What is the history?" Then you have to say, "And who said it?" So some things didn't make sense. Some things I rejected. When I was growing up, it didn't make sense that Hitler would be allowed to say what he said about the Jewish people and to murder them, and that the United States would not open our doors to them. We ended up in the war, but we should have opened our doors.

But *then*, while World War II was going on, we still had segregation. So what kind of sense did *that* make? My generation looked at it, and as you know, we're going to be the generation that's going to fight against segregation, because it didn't make sense.

You look at the world you live in, and then you start to ask yourself, "What makes sense?" We're living with that fool in the White House, and it doesn't make sense that he's dropping bombs on people. It was just Easter, and one of the people who helped Jesus carry the cross was Simon, the Cyrene. We're dropping bombs on Syria, yet we claim to be Christians.

A recent poem of yours in the Oxford American, "The Blues," seemed like a kind of sense-making in itself—a way to say very clearly, "Here is the history of what you are seeing; here is the history of what you are hearing." In your writing, is that something that you are looking for, the sense-making of it?

I'm looking at things that are there and saying, "What makes sense?" I've been teasing the gentlemen lately, because there's been so much raping going on. I said, "If these things continue to happen, the penis is going to become extinct." And the guys are like, "Oh my god!"

Every organ that human beings have that has been misused, we've gotten rid of. We don't have tonsils anymore. We don't have the sixth finger anymore. We don't have the sixth toe anymore. We have evolved beyond these things, because they didn't make sense. If men don't learn to use their penis properly, we're going to lose the penis, because it doesn't make sense.

So somebody said, "Well, what will we do to mate? How will we go forward with mating?" That, I don't know. But I do know that Mother Nature takes things that don't make sense away from us. We've got a history of that.

I deal with the world as I see it, so I've only written, if I'm not mistaken, one poem about rape. Other people have done better jobs. But, except me, I don't think anybody has written anything about the extinction of the penis.

You started a press, NikTom LTD., to publish Black female poets, and your book with James Baldwin, *A Conversation*, focuses on gender and racial roles in the family. What advice do you have for people who want to make room with and for one another now?

I'm coming from another generation—I came up of a generation of segregation, so, we had things defining where we could and couldn't go, and things like that. But me personally, I never was into, "Oh, I want to be the most favorite girl in school," or something. None of that made sense to me. I would watch people trying to impress people, and I would say to myself, "Why in the world are you doing that?"

It's incredibly comfortable and nice when you can look at your own work and say to yourself, "I did a good job." And then you let it go, because anything else is going to make you crazy, and anything else, you're going to be trying to impress people who don't even like you. That's the truth! You have to be very careful of letting people who not only don't know you, but don't understand you, don't like you... you can't let those people determine who you are.

When I did the conversation with Jimmy, there were people standing in line for that—it was more Jimmy than me. I'm very fortunate to have a publisher; I've

been with HarperCollins now for 40 years. I haven't jumped around. Poets don't make money. If you're not looking for, "Oh, I want to write a book, and there'll be a movie, and I'll become rich and famous," you'll be happy. There can be a kind of freedom, when the reward is itself the work.

In your classes, how do you encourage your workshop students toward that worldview?

I hope that I'm reminding them, and I do say it oftentimes, that as writers, you trust your own voice. A lot of people write and think, "The public will like this," or, "This will be important," but you are your first reader. The first person that has to be impressed with what you're writing is you. You always have to remember that.

You have to read the poem and say, "My god, that's a good poem," and kind of smile at yourself. If you're not willing to do that, then you're wasting your time, and you're hurting yourself in another way because you're trying to please somebody who doesn't like you. You don't want to get in that position.

The immediacy of the details in your poems is striking: there's such an appreciation for the food, family, music—all these vessels for love. Do you have those kinds of sensuous things that are favorites to come back to? Ones that you've, over decades, found yourself returning to?

I'm 73. So I looked at things in my 20s very differently from when I looked at them in my 40s, not to mention when I look at them now. One of my very favorite songs is Bonnie Raitt's "Nick of Time." I love it because she could never have written "Nick of Time" when she was 25. She would never have been able to do it.

That's exactly what we are: moving on, but we keep finding wonderful things in the nick of time. That's what time teaches us. It's a song I listen to a lot. I probably would not have liked "Nick of Time" 40 years ago.

I've read you write about your love of older age. I'm curious about how that's factored into your writing. What new discoveries have come out in your work?

I don't look at my work that way, so I'm not going to be the one to be able to answer that. The main thing that I say to my students, and I'd say to all of your readers, is don't be afraid to contradict yourself. Because you learn so much. I think I published my first book in, what, '67 or '68—and this is 2017, almost 50 years later. In that time, I have to have learned something. I have to have looked at something differently—so there's going to be a contradiction someplace. As a writer, you have to be willing to contradict yourself.

This reminds me a little bit of how, in your titles for your books, you'll specify that a collection of work is "a hybrid," or "poems and not quite poems."

I have fun doing all that, because I was telling stories in different ways, and so there are going to be changes. I edited a book that I really like, *The 100 Best African American Poems*, and there's a code in there, but I cheated. It was hard to find 100 poems, and so I was a little over. I enjoy playing with things like that, because why shouldn't I enjoy my own work? Why shouldn't I enjoy my career? Why shouldn't I be happy with it?

When you have those moments, and think, "Okay, this form seems to me to be a little rigid, or it doesn't include all that I want to include," do you have strategies for finding that newer, fuller, or left-fieldish way of approaching it? Do you say, "Well, let me try this particular thing?"

Every poem is not going to do everything. Poems are like food. I'm a foodie and a good cook—at some point, you are saying to yourself, "Well, I know that this meal is all right." That doesn't mean that tomorrow I'm not going to do something else.

That's what poems do. You do what you do, and it makes sense, and you're proud of it, and you say, "Wow, that's very nice," but, you know: Today you're frying chicken and you're making mashed potatoes, and that was really good, but you didn't have green beans. Or you didn't make a salad. There's something that you didn't do. You're not going to blame yourself for that. What you end up saying is, "Next time I'm cooking, maybe I will start with a great salad," because I'm a salad freak. I really like very fresh greens. "I wonder if I made my salad with olive oil instead of walnut oil," you make these differences, and you go, "Oh, that's really interesting." You're trying to tell yourself there's something else to be learned.

Where do you write now? Do you have a room or space that you prefer?

I write in my den. I'm very comfortable and happy there. I have a nice window; I can look out the window. I write on the computer, even though I don't email and I don't tweet. I have very poor handwriting and I'm a poor speller, and so a computer's really helpful, because, one, I can read what I've written, and, two, it will correct my spelling.

I wanted to ask about dreams. I notice them come up in your work so much—in the senses of aspiration, and of consciousness and imagination.

All artists, not just writers, dream. You wake up in the middle of the night saying, "I should write that line down." A lot of writers, including myself, always sleep with pens close by, because if you say, "I'll write it down in the morning," you'll forget it. You'll only remember, "I had a wonderful, wonderful line that I wanted to get for this poem," and you can't remember it.

When did that last happen for you?

It last happened when I was in the car, which is unusual. I'm a jazz person, and I was listening to some music and I thought, "Oh, that's a really lovely line for a poem." I'm not going to tell you what, because I'm working on it now, but I ended up pulling over to the side of the road because I didn't want to kill somebody or myself. And jotting it down, because I knew if I waited until I got home, I would have forgotten what it was, I would just remember how it felt. So I said, "Oh let me sit down and get this done."

You have these ideas while you're doing other things, while you're relaxing. I like very, very much to drive, and I really love trains. We don't have enough trains in the United States. You can sit on a train and watch everything go by, the trees, the woods... If you're lucky you can see a bear. You seldom see bears, but it's really nice if you can just see a bear or something. That's so nice. You relax. I don't relax on airplanes because there's nothing to see in an airplane—you've just got to hope that you land. But I really love taking a long train ride.

Is there anything in your process that stays constant from day to day? Do have routines that you return to when everything else allows for variation?

The one thing that's consistent in my work is that I try to make sense. I do have a sense of humor. If anybody were ever criticizing my work, they would see

that I laugh a lot at us—us being people—and with us, because a lot of stuff we do is just crazy, so I get a big kick out of that.

When I was much younger, I was, of course, much angrier. I'm a lot less interested in that kind of anger now. It's because, and again, as Bonnie Raitt teaches us, you know, "Life gets mighty precious when there's less of it to bear." I'm 73. I'm not going to spend my time being angry with some fool over something that doesn't make sense. What I'm going to do is go on about my business.

Nikki Giovanni recommends:

I think that one thing that you would love to do, which I did several times, is take a train ride across the United States. I think that that's just wonderful; that's just a wonderful thing to do.

Everybody has to go to Paris. I don't care who bombs it. I don't care what happens, you have to go to Paris. Because it's Paris dammit and you have to go.

I think that it would be good to take the Freedom Trail at some point. For everybody, Black and white. I think that that's important to see how we evolved.

You need to eat one thing that you never thought you would eat. I don't care what it is. I don't think that I would eat dog, because dogs are our friends. But I think that, you know, you have to eat that one, to get to go some place and try that one thing that you haven't tried.

And I think it's good just to fall in love. You know, recognizing it's not going to last. But, you know, fall in love.

Name

Nikki Giovanni

Vocation

Poet

Fact

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