

Artist As Leader: Nikki Giovanni

Nikki Giovanni is an American literary giant who truly beat her own path to greatness. In 1967, having just graduated from Fisk University with a B.A. in history, she created Cincinnati's first Black Arts Festival. Unable to find anyone to publish her poetry, she self-published her first collection, "Black Feeling Black Talk," which went on to sell over 10,000 copies in its first year alone. In 1970 she created her own company, Niktom Ltd., a publishing cooperative focused on highlighting the work of Black women.

Since then she has written two dozen books, including volumes of poetry, illustrated children's books and three collections of essays. She is the recipient of countless honors and awards, including the Langston Hughes Award, several NAACP Image Awards, a place on Oprah Winfrey's list of 25 living legends, and even a Grammy nomination. Having taught and lectured at universities all over the world, she is currently a University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech, where she has been teaching since 1987.

In this interview with Rob Kramer, she shares the infectious love of life, learning, history and story-telling that have made her one of America's most beloved and admired poets.

Rob Kramer: At what point in your career did you notice your art was having an influence on others as well as on society at large?

Nikki Giovanni: I'm not trying to sound humble or anything, because I'm not humble, but I don't think of my writing as that. I think that my job is to respect the truth and to write what I see. I'd just as soon write about a bird nesting in spring as I would write that a policeman should be executed for murdering Rodney King or George Floyd. I don't think of myself as leading anything. I think writers that get into that are crazy. They usually end up starting churches. Have you noticed lately all these church people?

Words are our paintings, and so we try to paint what we see. Sometimes we respond to the social justice systems, is what I'm trying to say, and sometimes we go and have a glass of wine and make love.

I think that the main thing that we — I don't want to speak for any other writer — but the main thing we do is that we try to say and put down Words are our paintings, and so we try to paint what we see. Sometimes we respond to the social justice systems, is what I'm trying to say, and sometimes we go and have a glass of wine and make love. We're not always sitting around with the social justice system. I would be probably the first one to say, after a while, you get a little tired of it.

I have written a lot about social justice and injustice. I was a history major in college. But after a while, you get tired of it. After a while, there is something else in life besides white people being crazy.

Rob: How do you maintain your resiliency?

Nikki: I don't know.

I think life is interesting. There's a T-shirt, as you probably know, that says, "Life is good." I don't know how they got that started, but I couldn't agree more. Life is a good idea. I say that to my audiences (now everything is virtual. I like being with people; I like being with an audience): Life is a good idea. And you know if you were born — and if we're here, you were born — and we know that that being the case, one day you'll die, so there's no particular rush to do that. There's no particular like, "Oh my goodness, I have to commit suicide because maybe if I don't, I won't die." You will die. So you may as well try to enjoy the life that you have. Life is a good idea. Life is good.

I think one of the main things that planet Earth needs to shed is these old 15th century, maybe further back than that, these ideas of race and caste and nationalities. I'm a space freak. If and when — and I hope sooner than later — we spend more time in space and open Earth up to lifeforms that we now don't know and the lifeforms ask us, as everybody does, "Who are you?" we're going to have to answer. I can't say, "I'm a hokie," though I am, because they will be looking at me like, "Well, what's a hokie?" Or I could say, "I'm from Virginia." And they would say, "What's a Virginia?" They'd have no idea what we're talking about.

We live on this planet, and we need to teach our youngsters to respect and to live with this planet. This is who you are. You're not white, you're not black, you're not religious. You are an Earthling.

The only thing that I could really answer that would be helpful in explaining to a Martian — I'm going to call it a Martian because that's what I know it as — when the Martian says, "Well, who are you? Where are you from?" I would say, "Earth." I think it's way time that we teach our youngsters that we are Earthlings. We live on this planet, and we need to teach our youngsters to respect and to live with this planet. This is who you are. You're not white, you're not black, you're not religious. You are an Earthling, and the rest of the Earthlings ought

to leave you alone and let you conduct your life in any responsible way you see fit.

Rob: To what extent do you use your role as a professor to discuss these kinds of issues with your students? Does this affect the way you teach?

Nikki: It does. [Laughing] My students, probably all, if you asked them and they were honest — they're good kids; I love teaching — they would probably say, "Well, Nikki is a little crazy, but we enjoy the class."

What I want my students to do is to have faith in their own voice, to have trust in their own voice. I teach writing classes. I teach writing for children's literature. I think children's literature — and I'm saying this as slowly as I know how — is the most important literature, period. It's all built on folk literature. It's how people who did not have the ability to read and write, who did not have the ability to have paper, it's how they told the stories to the next generation and the next generation. We who are Black Americans told most of our stories not necessarily through folk tales, though there are a lot of folk tales. We told it through the spirituals. We shared the knowledge that we had, I think, through the spirituals. And we still do.

The other day, I was talking to someone and I was laughing because there's an old spiritual — I said, "Those people knew what they were talking about!" — there's an old spiritual that says, "God's going to set this world on fire, yes, yes, yes. God's going to set this world on fire one of these days. Hallelujah." And I just loved that because ... I'm sorry for the people who are dead in California. I'm not sitting around wishing that people that don't have any particular reason to be dead are dead.

But you think about it. Two hundred years ago, if you were at a homecoming — or I don't know how the enslaved got together; you're out in the forest just wanting to praise the Lord — and somebody said, "God's going to set this world on fire," and everybody joined in the song, how would you know that 200 years from now that would be a

totally appropriate song as you watch the world being on fire, whether it's California or whether it's Australia? And we keep watching that. I love that. Those folks knew what they were talking about.

I teach children's literature. I'm trying to say to my students, "Some of these things that we've heard make sense. Some of these things are prophetic." I'm a big fan of spirit. I think that the spirit is meaningful. I think that we have something called the soul, and I have a lot of respect for your soul and for my own, and I want them to.

... if writing is what you feel is your calling, you have to understand that you probably won't ever get any credit for it. It'll be 200 years before anybody knows what you did. ... You do it so that you know what you've done, and 100 years from now, maybe other people will.

But, and it's a big but, if you are going to be or want to be a whatever, a writer, if writing is what you feel is your calling, you have to understand that you probably won't ever get any credit for it. It'll be 200 years before anybody knows what you did. When you think about the great writers that we read today, when you think about that Emily Dickinson never left her home. She never knew she was a great poet. The Brontë sisters never knew that they wrote great novels.

Many of the theories that we hear, many of the people that studied science, they never knew that they were right. You don't do it for that vision. You do it so that you know what you've done, and 100 years from now, maybe other people will. But as a writer you're almost never going to see that your work was significant. It just doesn't go that way. The sooner you let that go, the happier you're going to be with your career, with your life.

Rob: Who were artists that you followed closely as you were coming into your own?

Nikki: Thelonious Monk. I don't know if you know Thelonious Monk, but he's a pianist.

Rob: Yes. Oh yes, yes, yes.

Nikki: Thelonious is wonderful. When Thelonious began to be heard by other people I almost said, "When he started his career," but he didn't start his career; he was playing the piano — I just read an interview with his mother — he was playing the piano at 11. As he began to be heard, people would say to Monk, "You can't play. Those notes don't go together. That's the wrong note." And Thelonious said, and I will always remember that, I want a T-shirt that says that: "The piano don't have no bad notes." He's right! The piano does not have bad notes. It has notes that you haven't heard put together in a certain way. And Monk did that. He did an incredible job.

Now, I couldn't have appreciated and did not appreciate Thelonious Monk when I was in my teens. I did not understand him. He would play, and it was like, "OK, that's Thelonious Monk." I didn't understand. I really didn't. But as I've gotten older, I've seen not only what he meant but how he did it.

But the piano don't have no bad notes like poetry doesn't have bad images. It's just that you learn more and do better.

Writers do that. As a poet, I have put together metaphors that I probably would not have done. I'm 75. No, I'm not. Goodness, I'm 77 years old. I put together metaphors that I wouldn't have been able to think about, let's say 50 years ago, in my 20s. I wouldn't have thought about it at all. But now that I'm older and I see things differently, I can share that, which is why I don't read myself. I don't go back and read what I wrote when I was in my 20s because I would say to myself, as Thelonious wouldn't, I would say, "Oh, I made a mistake." But the piano don't have no bad notes like poetry doesn't have bad images. It's just that you learn more and do better. I don't know if that makes sense.

Rob: Who else influenced you as you were developing as an artist?

Nikki: Well, I read everything. I read Darwin, of course, and that was going to be one of the earlier people. Mostly, of course, I listened. I sat on the porch. I lived with my grandparents, and I sat on Well, I lived with my parents who had a bad marriage. Now I say, “There’s no such thing as a bad marriage; it just didn’t suit me.” And since I wasn’t married to either one of them at that point, I went to live with my grandparents, and my grandparents were very kind to let me come and live with them. I would listen to those stories.

Of course Grandmother and Grandpapa were church people, so you knew that every Sunday morning what you were going to do, you’re going to go to Sunday school, which was a good idea. And then you got a nickel. I didn’t realize until recently — and it made me cry — but see, Grandpapa was retired when I went to live with them. What it must have cost them to give me a quarter, which is what they did! I had to put a nickel in Sunday school, and then I had the nickel for ice cream, and then I had to put the rest of it ... there were two you had to put in church collections. To give me that quarter took a lot, because Grandpapa was a schoolteacher. He was a Black man who taught school, so you can imagine in Knoxville, TN, he didn’t have any money. And yet Grandmother, who was always great at that, found that quarter for me every Sunday.

We went to Carter Roberts, it was called. We’d go to Sunday school; you’d put your nickel in. And after Sunday school, we’d go and get ice cream. It took me until relatively recently to realize, how did she get that quarter? What did she do just to find that quarter? Because Grandmother never worked. I say never worked — women always worked — but she never was paid for her work. I don’t understand. I don’t know where she got it.

It’s amazing to me that when I said, “Can I come and live with you?” she said, “I’ll ask John Brown.” Which was not what was going to happen. That I did know, that it was going to be her decision. Now all of a sudden a man who was making very little money because he is

retired and she is not having a job, they have another mouth to feed. They have something else to do.

To this day, I'm very picky about food. I don't eat a lot. It takes a lot for me to get excited. I eat what is put before me, and that's the truth. Grandmother, of course, she cooked and she would fix the plates. Whatever Grandmother fixed, I ate. I didn't want any more. There was no "Can I have a second helping?" None of that. I ate it. And of course I was the one who washed the dishes.

I was just writing about that. I've begun writing about the things that I've learned that I could not possibly have known 50 years ago when I was in my 20s. But now I do; I understand. I don't know why I knew even back then that whatever they gave me was what I had and I was not going to ask for any more.

Grandmother finally said to me, "You need some clothes," and I did say to her, "No, I'm fine. I don't need anything else. I'm fine." I remember I had a brown skirt and I had a dress. And she says, "No, you have to go." It was Rich's department store. Rich's was prejudiced. Rich's started in Atlanta. Some people listening to this may know Rich's. Grandmother had a charge account at Rich's, and I don't know how. And she said, "No, you have to have more clothes." So she took me and bought me another couple of dresses and another couple of skirts, which I had until I went to college. Because I would never ask for any of that, because it did occur to me, where would they get the money to buy clothes for me? And who was I trying to impress?

I still, at 77, have no interest in impressing anybody. I just don't; it's gone. I'm just a poet. I like what I write and I do the best I can.

As I am talking to you, I am not trying to impress you. I still, at 77, have no interest in impressing anybody. I just don't; it's gone. I'm just a poet. I like what I write and I do the best I can. I read it and I read other people, but I'm not going to get tied up in, "Oh, I wonder who will think this?" And I say that to my students: "I can't think of anything

dumber than sitting around, wanting to please somebody that you don't even know."

I never have had an agent. My students will ask me about that: "Well, how did you get an agent?" I mean, come on! That doesn't even make sense. I don't and didn't. What I have is the poetry. Let's start with that, because I say to them what's important. I didn't have an agent. Who had an agent? You think Newton had an agent? You think Plato had an agent? You think Socrates had an agent? Get over it. Let's do the work, and we'll deal with what's left behind.

Rob: I think it's fair to say that you're a giant in the American letters. You're an elder. Does that come with any responsibility?

Nikki: I'm a nice person. I think I'm nice. I'm not friendly, and I say that all the time. People laugh and say, "Yes, you are." But I'm not. I'm really not friendly, but I am nice. If you write me, I will write back.

I grew up in the Christian church AME, the African Methodist Episcopal Church. We were taught to try to comfort not only the sick but those in prison, so I actually write several prisoners who have been writing me for a long time. They just don't have anybody. One gentleman, Darrell Lamont Bailey, has been writing me for 33 years. We have been writing each other for 33 years, because Darrell is in prison for life and it's not likely that he will be released. He's three years younger than I am. He doesn't know his grandchildren or his great grandchildren at all, so in many respects I have become his family. So you're saying, well, am I an elder? I just think of my responsibility to people who reach out to me.

I'm the baby in my family. In the Giovannis, I'm the baby. The Watsons, my grandma and grandpapa had three daughters: my mother, Yolanda; my second aunt, Ann; and my baby aunt, Agnes. Mommy had two daughters; Agnes, the baby, had two sons; and Ann had a son and a daughter. So the home became balanced. Mommy died, and shortly after that, which is very sad, my middle aunt died. She and Mommy were very close. Not that Agnes wasn't, because Ag was very strong and aware of things. But when Mommy died, my

sister Gary — as I said, I was the baby — died three or four weeks later. And then my aunt Ann died, leaving Agnes as the elder, and that worked because Agnes was always one of the strongest people. But when Ag died, which has been a couple of years ago now, that left me as the oldest person. I hadn't thought about being an elder of the Watsons.

Something happened, I really don't remember what now, but my cousin Pat — I only have one girl cousin, Pat; we are the two women left — called to ask a question. I think I said something like, "Pat, I don't know why you're calling me." She said, "Well, you're the elder now." And I thought, "Oh my goodness. I am the elder!" I thought, "Yeah, that does give me responsibilities." So when people get sick, I have to get on a plane. I don't mean it like that; it's not a burden. But I go. When my cousin Terry died, I had to be there. He lived far away, but I had to be there for his funeral because, again, I'm the elder. I hadn't thought about, "What does it mean?"

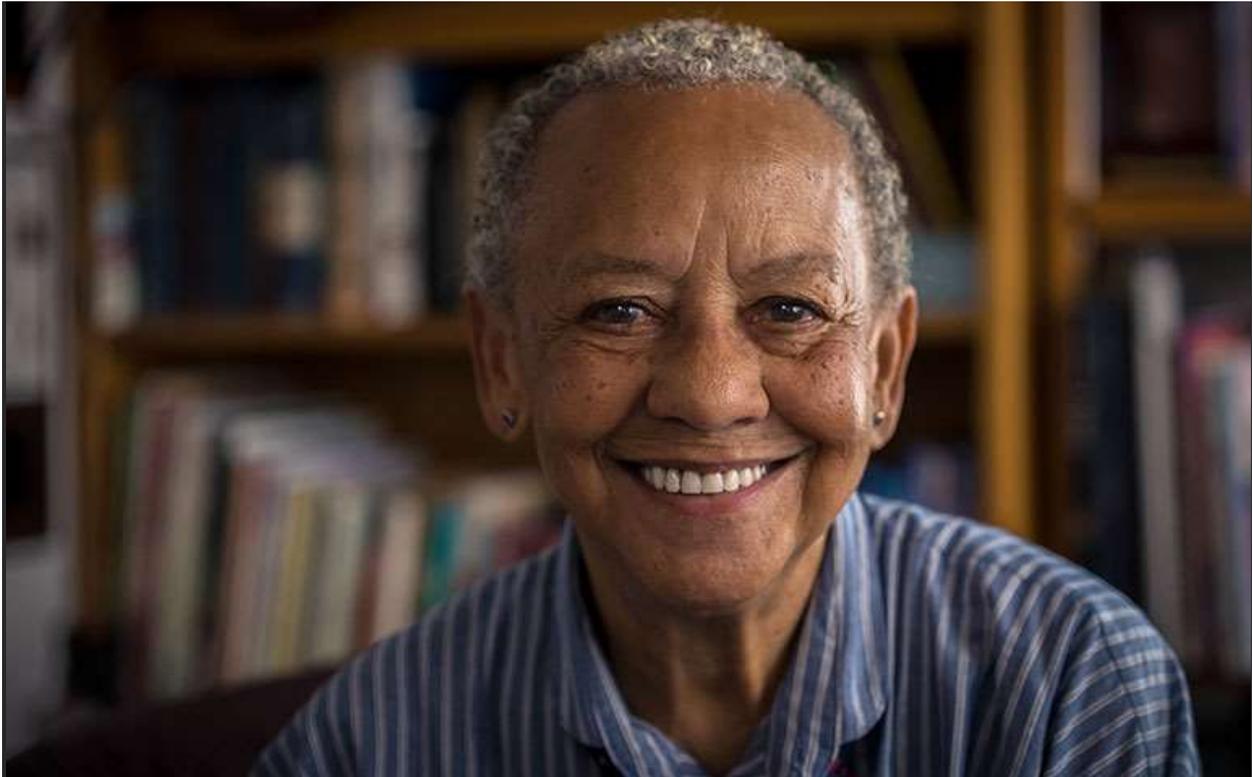
So when strangers write me and say, "Oh, I read you when I was in the fourth and fifth grade," I think, "Oh my goodness!" I write back and say, "Thank you." You just try to be polite. Again, I'm not trying to run some cult. I'm not Jim Jones or Marcus Garvey or Donald Trump. I don't want any of that. I just want to do what I'm supposed to do, and I try to be nice about it.

But I also know that there's a great part of myself that I'm not letting anyone in. That will be the case until the day I die. I know that there's a part of me that belongs to me. There's some level — I guess the term would be privacy — but there's some part I say that to my students, "Writing is a lonely profession, and if you don't hold onto that loneliness, you can't continue the writing."

Epilogue

Even with the tremendous stature Nikki Giovanni has gained in her career, she reminds us to stay true to ourselves. Lessons learned from our time with Nikki include:

- **Know thyself.** Know who you are and where you came from, and do not apologize for it. Authenticity is contagious. Who are you?
- **Be present.** Live life in the present moment and avoid the suffering of thinking about the past or the future. Lead from today, not from what might happen tomorrow.
- **Know your role.** Whether you're leading people, teaching, being an activist or making provocative art, know your role. Nikki knows that first and foremost she is a poet. What are you?
- **Don't focus on the reception of your work.** Do your work because that's what you do. Lead others to do the same.
- **Don't play it safe.** There is a great saying: "Life begins at the end of your comfort zone." Where are you?



Nikki Giovanni

POET

One of the most widely read American poets, Nikki Giovanni has spurred movements, turned hearts, and informed generations. She's been hailed as a firebrand, a radical, a healer, and a sage; a wise and courageous voice who has spoken out on the sensitive issues, including race and gender, that touch our national consciousness. Giovanni has written more than two dozen books, including

volumes of poetry, illustrated children's books, and three collections of essays. With her new collection, "A Good Cry: What We Learn From Tears and Laughter," Giovanni offers an intimate, affecting and illuminating look at her personal history and the mysteries of her own heart. She takes us into her confidence, describing the joy and peril of aging and recalling the violence that permeated her parents' marriage and her early life. Giovanni has won numerous awards, including the Langston Hughes Medal and the NAACP Image Award, has been named as one of Oprah Winfrey's 25 "Living Legends." She has been a Distinguished Professor teaching writing and literature at Virginia Tech since 1987. Giovanni remains as determined and committed as ever to the fight for civil rights and equality. Always insisting on presenting the truth as she sees it, her focus is on the individual—specifically, the power one has to make a difference in oneself and in the lives of others. "A lot of people resist transition and therefore never allow themselves to enjoy who they are," she says. "Embrace the change, no matter what it is; once you do, you can learn about the new world you're in and take advantage of it."