



Nikki Giovanni is a world-renowned poet, writer, commentator, activist, and educator. Early in her career she was dubbed the “Princess of Black Poetry.” She is now listed as a “National Treasure” and one of Oprah Winfrey’s twenty-five “Living Legends.” Among her myriad honors and awards are Woman of the Year (*Ladies Home Journal* and *Ebony*), the Rosa L. Parks Woman of Courage Award, and the Langston Hughes Medal for poetry. The author of more than thirty books, she is a professor at Virginia Tech. Nikki Giovanni was born on June 7, 1943, in Knoxville, Tennessee.



Riding a Rainbow

I'm a big fan of aging. People talk about going back to their twenties; I wouldn't even go back to my forties. I love being in my sixties. The sixties are like riding a rainbow. You learn more and understand so much more about your place in the world and how the world actually runs. Everything makes a lot more sense.

I've been called outspoken in my life, but I never thought of it that way. I was just going forward with what I knew to be right. A lot of that came from the two fabulous women who reared me—my mother and my grandmother. I conduct my business as they conducted theirs. Grandmother was very outspoken, which meant she said what was on her mind. One of her messages to me was "Just tell the truth and let it fall." Because of that I've always been comfortable with accepting what comes my way and not worrying about what doesn't. Their support of me for being myself and speaking the truth was also an important part of this. Both of them were big believers in me and that was a huge help.

Some people might view the way I got my career started as audacious, but they don't know the reason I wanted to have my first book party at Birdland [the fabled jazz club in midtown Manhattan]. I had borrowed the money to pay for the printing of my first collections of poetry, *Black Feeling*, *Black Talk* in late 1967 and *Black Judgement* in early 1968. Nobody had ever had a book party at Birdland. Lloyd Price was one of the owners of Birdland, but I met with Harold Logan, who was his silent partner. I told him I wanted to have a book party there on a Sunday. The club was closed on Sundays.

"So you want to rent the club," he said.

"Oh no, I don't want to rent the club," I said. "I don't have any money, Mr. Logan. I'm a poet. I want to have it here because my mother's a jazz lover; she loves Bird and she loves Billie Holiday. So I'm not asking you and then I'm going to leave and ask some-

body else. I want it at Birdland, where George Shearing stands, you understand?"

He was looking at me like, "What the hell is this girl talking about?" Then he said, "Well, Giovanni, I'll tell you what. If you bring me a hundred people, you can have the club. Ninety-nine people and you'll owe me five hundred dollars."

That was real money back then, but I said, "You got it," and we shook on it.

Birdland used to be on Forty-fourth, before they moved, and I walked upstairs, saying to myself, "Oh, my god, I just shook hands with a man that kills people for a living."

But I didn't have a problem asking Logan. I wanted to do something that Mommy would enjoy. It was that simple. The only thing that could happen is that I could fail. And I'm sure Mr. Logan would have had something ugly happen to me had I failed. I had no doubt about that. Or I would have found the five hundred dollars. But I knew that I was not in over my head as to what I thought was possible. I wasn't scared of failing. I've never been scared about that. If you can't embrace failure, you can't be a writer.

I called my sister, Gary, because I needed some help and I couldn't afford to pay for it. She's extremely well organized and helped map out everything. We absolutely packed Birdland. My next-door neighbor and good friend Morgan Freeman read for me. Barbara Ann Teer read for me. Larry Neal read. It was wonderful. Harold was pleased. I was pleased. We made the second front in the *New York Times*, the New York page, with a big picture. And we made the front page of the *Amsterdam News* and of *Muhammad Speaks*.

The success of the event brought me a lot of publicity. Phil Petrie, who was working at William Morrow, invited me to lunch with the vice president and they said they'd like to publish the books. I said, "Great, because publishing is a capital intensive business, and I'm not in business. I'm a poet." I told them the amount I needed as an advance, so I could pay back the money I had borrowed from my grandmother and other people to publish my books. The vice president told me they didn't give that kind of advance for poetry. So I thanked them for the lunch and the offer but told them I couldn't sell the book because it was all I had to pay back the people who had helped me. "I'm going to pay them back or I'm going to go down," I said, "but I'm not going to sell them out and tell them I don't have their money."

Four days later, Phil called me and said, "You got it."

I wasn't trying to hold them up. I wasn't trying to do anything but take care of the people who had taken care of me. I've always done that and I always will.

So that first event wasn't all about publicizing me. It was all about love. I was explaining that to a young man I'm mentoring. I told him, "You cannot let other people's priorities be yours." As for me, my priorities are simple. What I love I look out for—it's that basic.

Listen and Learn

People sometimes ask who my role models were. That's a term I really hate. It's one of those terms that's in the lexicon, so we're stuck with it. Look at Harriet Tubman. She didn't do what she did because she had a role model. There wasn't anybody doing what she did; she didn't see it anywhere. We live by our imagination; we don't live by what we see. We in America try to dumb people down with the concept "If you can't see it, it can't be done." That doesn't make any sense. If you can't see it, that's every reason to do it.

The phrase "influential people" works better. Influence is something that's been around forever and will always be. In my case, aside from Mommy and Grandmother, one of the influential people in my life was Sister Althea, my sixth grade teacher who is a nun. I met her when I was ten and we have remained friends. She still spends Thanksgivings with me. Another was my eighth grade teacher, Alfreda Delaney. She was a good friend and a strong believer in my writing ability. I enjoyed writing, but I wasn't sure I was really doing it. She assured me I was, then said, "But you're handwriting is so poor, you have to take typing." I'm not good with physical things like that, but I took typing. You couldn't tell those old ladies you couldn't do it—and God knows that's why we love them. When they said do something, you said, "Okay, I'll do it."

I am close to the two of my mother's friends who are still alive. I visit with them, correspond with them, and talk with them. My mother and that generation had great friendships. They showed me how important it is to love your friends.

So you try to do what the old ladies did because they did it right.

My grandmother was a club woman—the garden club, the book club, the flower club, the Court of Colanthe, and the Deltas. I learned from her that good leaders have to enter into the realities of other people. In other words, we have to listen to understand what's

important to another person. If we can enter into another reality, then we can make a change. Eldridge Cleaver had that statement, "You're either a part of the solution or a part of the problem." That was never true. You're part of both. That's why I tell my students that it needs to be "we can," not "you should."

I used to watch some of my colleagues, if I can use that collegial term for the sixties, become frustrated with the people. They would be organizers and they would become frustrated. You can't be frustrated with the people. You have to learn. And I still do. I listen to the people. It's one of the major reasons I'm a big fan of hip hop. When hip hop started coming up, a lot of people my age rejected it. They didn't like the cadence, they didn't like what the rappers were saying, they didn't like the way they dressed. And I thought, what are we missing here? Some of the most creative minds of the next generation are involved in this music. We have to find out what it is.

A lot of people ask me if it's really true that I have a Tupac Shakur tattoo [top-selling hip hop artist and social activist, murdered in 1996]. Well, that's not something you'd lie about! I have a "Thug Life" tattoo, which is what Tupac had tattooed across his stomach. He used to say, "I'd rather be with the thugs than the people who are putting them down." [By thugs, he meant people who came from oppressed backgrounds but made something of themselves despite their early lack of opportunity.] I have that on my lower arm because I wanted to share it. I wanted a public tattoo because the loss of him was so great. How you could not admire the passion and the genius of Tupac Shakur is beyond me. The loss of him is only comparable in white America to the loss of John Kennedy Jr. They were both saying the same thing: we can make a difference here. I mourned both of them.

The Boulder of Love

If asked for words of wisdom on how to approach life at any age, I would say that the key is to say yes, say yes to everything. Don't always be second-guessing yourself, finding reasons why something won't work even before you try it. Possibilities cannot occur without yes. So you have to say yes. Especially because so many people tell you "Don't."

Audaciousness comes in refusing to be silenced. People especially want to silence women. We have had in the world infibulation, the sewing up of the labia of a girl or woman. I saw a sculpture of a woman with her mouth sewn shut. And I thought, "Yeah, that's really what they want to sew up." The vaginal area is a substitute for the mouth.

If you live long enough, though, which I'm happy that I have, all the truth you spoke and maybe got criticized for comes to pass and then you're seen as a sage.

I'm very optimistic about the future of human beings. There is progress in the human condition. The progress is never going to be what you would like when you start off as a young person and you're really committed to change. You want to see things get better, but you want them to get better soon. But things don't get better soon. Things get better incrementally, so what you have is a revolution so that the evolution can take place. That's a hard concept for kids. I was like that. You want to see the change that you're trying to bring about, but you're not going to see it in that way because the change is rising water.

In my view, what you want to do is good work while you're here. You cannot look to tomorrow. You have to do it today. And of course, if you're an old revolutionary like me, you realize you have to teach the kids. American kids are being dumbed down and I'm really tired of it. Everything cannot be Clifford the big red dog. There have to be some good stories, and we have to tell them.

I'm working on a poem about Sisyphus, which will then be a children's book. What we've heard about Sisyphus is wrong. Yes, he was pushing the boulder up the hill, but it wasn't a punishment. He was pushing that boulder out of love. The gods bless you with a boulder to push. It may be hard, but you have to push your boulder up the hill. You do it because you love what you're doing.

That doesn't mean you forget to have fun. Audacious aging means that you're still enjoying yourself, that you're still finding things that are joyful, even when your circumstances might seem to make that difficult. I have a dear friend who has multiple sclerosis, for example, and she is audaciously and wonderfully alive because she is still enjoying her living.

As for me, I am the first Giovanni to make it to the age of sixty-five. There is nothing as wonderful as growing old.