

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

February 25, 2019

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



BLK History Month

If Black History Month is not
viable then wind does not
carry the seeds and drop them
on fertile ground
rain does not
dampen the land
and encourage the seeds
to root
sun does not
warm the earth
and kiss the seedlings
and tell them plain:
You're As Good As Anybody Else
You've Got A Place Here, Too

Nikki Giovanni¹

Reflections

Nikki Giovanni is one of the best-known poets working today. She first reached prominence during the late 1960s and early 1970s; her earliest volumes were largely in response to the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Critics were quick to praise her sense of urgency in raising awareness of the plight of black people in America and her call for unity and solidarity among all people, white and of color, everywhere.

Giovanni was—along with Maya Angelou, June Jordan and Audre Lorde—one of the major poets and activists to come out of the Black Arts Movement, begun in 1965 shortly after Amiri Baraka opened the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem, New York. It was an overtly political, decade-long movement that sought to emphasize and expand existing narratives of the black experience in America; it celebrated art and culture from music and literature to theater, dance, and poetry performance. (Spoken word, hip-hop, rap, and slam poetry are direct results of the Black Arts Movement.)

I offer this poem as Black History Month concludes this year, aware of the societal friction that exists between those who wonder about the relevance of the occasion—or question

¹ "BLK History Month" by Nikki Giovanni from *Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea*, HarperCollins Publishers. Used with permission.

whether its purpose does more to further isolate African-American history as distinct from American history, than it does to illuminate the former and marry it to the latter—and those who work diligently to bring American history into a fuller, wider, and deeper context. Giovanni’s poem is, if not a direct rebuttal to the question of whether or not Black History Month is “viable,” at least a strong argument underscoring the importance of such a designation. Giovanni is among those who believe that as long as the history of people of color, of women, of gay and lesbian people, of other marginalized groups continue to be treated as separate histories, the nation does little to rectify the mistakes it has made in creating incomplete if not false (and destructive, dehumanizing) narratives.

Giovanni has been outspoken in her criticism of the ongoing inequalities facing black Americans and their struggles to combat discrimination and racism. To be made aware of the rhetoric and policies of the past is to further the conversation toward a more thorough understanding of the human condition—our behaviors, our prejudices, our struggles and achievements—over time. I believe that one purpose—if not *the* purpose—of poetry, and of all the arts, is to bear witness not only to great historical events but also to smaller gestures, to relationships, to the private aspects of human life. If designating one month out of the year to acknowledge the unique accomplishments of some of our most influential figures engenders a wider appreciation of our collective experience, then I am all the more indebted to the work of Nikki Giovanni.

In an article published in *Contemporary Authors*, she declares, “Writing is...what I do to justify the air I breathe.” There is something incredibly poignant about such a sentiment, about the idea that one must justify one’s existence at all. The poem for this week might be seen as its own “justification” for the continued “viability” not only of a month-long celebration by title, but of a national appreciation for a whole movement, an entire lineage and legacy that has prepared for the future a richer and indeed more fertile ground, and that continues to nourish both seed and flower for the good of all.

✧ About the poet

Nikki Giovanni (b. 1943) is a prolific and world-renowned writer, activist and educator. She was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, and as a young child moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, before eventually returning to her home state where she enrolled at Fisk University, a prestigious, historically black college in Nashville. On campus, she joined an emerging black renaissance of writers and other artists of color as they sought to inspire, express, and celebrate black culture. She went on to receive graduate degrees at the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University and has since received numerous accolades for her contributions to arts and letters, including over 20 honorary degrees from all over the United States. She has taught at Rutgers University, Ohio State University, and Virginia Tech. A three-time New York Times bestseller, she is the author of numerous works of poetry and nonfiction and several books for children.



Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts
St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church © 2019