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"The only thing to connect tragedy is love."

by Erin Kiley

"Poetry will always be the backbone of it all," says celebrated poet Nikki Giovanni. "We continue to be part of the truth-telling, bringing out the best in people."

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April 8, 2010

[\[Online Publication, Link\]](#)**Nikki Giovanni: "The only thing to connect tragedy is love."**Words [Erin Kiley](#)

Thursday, April 8th, 2010 at 8:02 am

I recently had to call a friend in the middle of the night, just to share a poem called "Bicycles," from Nikki Giovanni's recent book of the same name:

Poet Nikki Giovanni



*Midnight poems are bicycles
Taking us on safer journeys
Than jets
Quicker journeys
Than walking
But never as beautiful
A journey
As my back
Touching you under the quilt*

*Midnight poems
Sing a sweet song
Saying everything
Is all right [...]*

It was a poem too big not to share.

Giovanni explained the book's title succinctly: "Bicycles: because love requires trust and balance." In recent years, the poet's mother and sister died; and the university where Giovanni teaches, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), faced heartbreak when troubled student Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people and himself. *Bicycles: Love Poems* was Giovanni's attempt to maintain trust and balance. The defining idea behind *Bicycles* is this: "There were two tragedies," Giovanni said. "The only thing to connect tragedy is love."

Giovanni's love of Virginia Tech is palpable: "It's just home," she said. "You feel it. [...] I was welcomed here by the university community and the larger community." On April 17, 2007, Giovanni stood before her mourning community and read a poem called "We Are Virginia Tech."* In it, she reminded the survivors that they did not deserve this pain:

"...No one deserves a tragedy. We are Virginia Tech. The Hokie Nation embraces our own and reaches out with open heart and hands to those who offer their hearts and minds. We are strong, and brave, and innocent, and unafraid. We are better than we think and not quite what we want to be. We are alive to the imagination and the possibility. We will continue to invent the future through our blood and tears and through all our sadness. We are the Hokies. We will prevail. We will prevail. We will prevail. We are Virginia Tech."

The crowd surged to their feet after the last word was spoken. Giovanni threw her arms up and smiled. Then, the chanting began: "Let's go Hokies!"

On YouTube, a video of the convocation has been viewed more than 64,000 times. One viewer, writing under the name "academiccuriosity," wrote, "I was in that room not 30 feet away crying for my friends I had lost when [Giovanni] said this. She gave me permission to stand up and take my world back...to realize that I was no longer a victim but a charged and fueled Hokie ready to invent the future."

People turn to poetry in times of need and celebration, Giovanni reminded me, saying poetry was "posted everywhere after 9-11" and the Virginia Tech massacre. She said poetry is also embraced in times of joy, like weddings and inaugurations.

"Poetry will always be the backbone of it all," Giovanni said. "We continue to be part of the truth-telling, bringing out the best in people."

Giovanni tries to bring out the best in people through her work as a University Distinguished Professor, as well: "I try to get students to look at the world a little differently. If they're conservative, I try to get them to think a little more liberal. If they're liberal, I try to get them to understand a more conservative point of view. A new point of view creates a more balanced human being. It's like writers: they create the protagonist and antagonist, so they see both sides of the story."

Teachers, students and writers alike seek to balance, to ride the bike, moving "With the flow/ Of the earth." Once you learn how, you can never forget.

Nikki Giovanni's autobiography, Gemini, was a finalist for the National Book Award. She received NAACP Image Awards for Love Poems, Blues: For All the Changes, and Quilting the Blackeyed Pea. Giovanni is reading at this year's Tidewater Community College Literary Festival at the Advanced Technology Center at the Virginia Beach Campus on Thursday afternoon, April 8, at 12:30 p.m. and at The Forum in Building A of the New Portsmouth Campus on that evening, April 8, at 7 p.m. A book signing will follow each reading.

*Note: This quotation from "We are Virginia Tech" is transcribed from video and differs in lineation and wording from the final version in *Bicycles*.