



2 June 2020

Dear College of Humanities and Fine Arts community,

I'm tired. To quote civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." I suspect that many of you are also tired—of the pandemic, xenophobia and sinophobia, the extralegal killings of unarmed black people like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, police brutality as well as the ravages of systemic oppression and justice delayed and denied.

I'm also conflicted—torn between hope and despair, love and war, creation and destruction. This conflict is best captured by the fact that I've been haunted for the last couple of days by two poems—Nikki Giovanni's "For Sandra" and "Allowables."

"For Sandra" (1968) opens "i wanted to write / a poem / that rhymes" (lines 1-3), but the speaker asserts "revolution doesn't lend / itself to be-bopping" (lines 4-5). Chastised by her neighbor for not writing "tree poems," the speaker surveys her community and the tumultuous upheaval surrounding events of the Civil Rights Movement and determines

maybe i shouldn't write  
at all  
but clean my gun  
and check my kerosene supply

perhaps these are not poetic  
times  
at all. (lines 22-30)

Published 45 years later, "Allowables" (2013) recounts the speaker's surprise encounter with a spider, "not a murderous brown recluse / Nor even a black widow" (lines 2-3). While attempting to pick up a book (ln 7), the speaker discovers the spider, "who should have run" (line 7). Scared, the reader smashes and kills it. At the poem's conclusion, the speaker muses,

I don't think  
I'm allowed  
To kill something  
Because I am  
Frightened. (lines 12-16)

Upon further reflection, both poems provide us with invaluable lessons about power. In "For Sandra," the speaker suggests that writing poetry during a revolution is futile, yet Giovanni continues to work in the poetic tradition, underscoring her belief in the power of the pen, that it is in fact mightier than the sword. "Allowables" reminds us of the power we all wield as human

beings and our moral obligation to be mindful of how we use that power in the treatment of others, particularly those amongst us who are vulnerable. Power is privilege and being afraid is not a justification for murder.

For those of you grappling to understand the historical import and significance of our collective outrage, I encourage you to see this moment as an opportunity to learn, understand, and empathize, to engage in self-education and self-exploration. Listen. Perhaps start with the 2020-2021 Book in Common, Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Anti-Racist* (2019).

For those of you reeling from these current events, please know that I share your frustrations and fears, your impulse to destroy in an attempt to share with others your pain, your hurt. I share Giovanni's words with you in the hopes that you will find comfort and encouragement in them. Ultimately, Giovanni's poetry reminds us of the importance of the work we undertake in the arts and humanities. The origin of the word poetry is *poiesis*, an ancient Greek word meaning to make, or, the act of bringing something into being that did not exist before. "For Sandra" and "Allowables" remind us that we can, in fact, create in the face of death and destruction, that what we do has the power to effect positive change.

As interim dean of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts, I am committed to addressing the issues at the heart of our nation's social and political unrest, to building a college that demonstrates through its words, deeds, curriculum, and service its desire to devise a better world. I invite you to join me in driving out darkness and despair by creating the world in which you wish to live. Write. Create. Examine. Make art. Share what you have been creating to help you cope, empathize, make sense, memorialize, and/or effect change. Email your submissions to [HFAtogether@csuchico.edu](mailto:HFAtogether@csuchico.edu). Together, we can and we will.

In solidarity,

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