

## Lessons From My 93-Year-Old Kindergarten Teacher by Carolyn North

for Orunamamu

The best teacher my children ever had growing up was in Kindergarten. Mary Beth Washington did almost everything contrary to the rules: she took the kids out walking in the rain; she slept with them during naptime; she came to school dressed like a circus performer. She was in love with birds, dancing, poetry and people. The School Board, more than once, voted to fire her, but the parents came to her defense again and again and won the day. She was about 30 years ahead of her time, a Flower Child before the era of flower children, with a genius for teaching kids. Once my own were in high school, the School Board finally had its way and kicked her out.

I ran into her this morning! She is 93 now, still going strong with a walking stick, and still dressed in bright yellow stockings and many layers of scarves. As she tells it, she is still teaching, except now it is out on the streets - and with her trusty stick, she adds, laughing.

"I teach the big children, now."

"I play it cool and take no jive, that's the reason I stay alive," she whispers in my ear. "I've got my bags of feathers and flowers, and I write poems and tell stories to whoever wants to hear them. Here - I just wrote this. It's for you."

She hands me a paper - the back of a café menu - and I read it:  
Good morning, Good morning, Good morning.

This is a good morning, this morning

And if tomorrow is a good morning,

Tomorrow will be a good....?

Then she cracked up with her own wit, and I cracked up with her. She scrutinized me out of shrewd eyes to judge whether I'd thought she had simply forgotten the last word, and when I assured her I knew it was deliberate, she flung her arms around me and gave me the same outpouring of love she has been bestowing on people in our community, young and old, for 70 years.

My friend John was one of those she stopped on the street some 25 years ago with her stories and feathers, and they still meet for breakfast every Friday at the same place they first ran into each other. At the time, he had invited her in for coffee but she had refused, saying the café was "hoity-toity for White folks only."

"C'mon," he had insisted, and he has escorted her to that café - same table - every week since.

We reminisced, we talked about what my grown up children were doing, we told John about the old days, and she gave us a lecture on the art of teaching what must be taught, if we are all to survive.

"Look for the gifts!" she lilted, gazing up. "Every feather dropped is a gift from the birds. Every loving word is a gift from the heart. We are all hurting so bad we need every gift from the heart we can get." She took a sip of her tea, and a bite of her breakfast.

"Help the little children," she said quietly, grabbing my hands and kissing my knuckles. "Keep your eyes out for who needs help, see who needs you to love them, wear beautiful stockings to make people smile." Here, she lifted her still-trim legs in their bright yellow stockings, showed off her new red clogs and slapped her lap in glee.

"You know, I live with my son now," she told us. "But people found out where I live and so I leave things on the porch for them. I know what people like - sometimes it's cake, sometimes it's a poem, sometimes it's a pretty bauble." She chuckled and gave me a wink.

"We know each other a long time," she informed John. "She came to the Board to fight for me, oh yes, I remember. You still fighting, honey?"

"Of course," I grinned. "Same way you do - with feathers and poems, with jokes and with as much love as I can muster." She nodded her approval, and told us she would soon be leaving to live with her other son in Canada. But she and John would be at the café next Friday for breakfast. Would I come join them?

You bet. I wouldn't miss it for anything.