

Mid-February Letter to My Granddaughter Maizie, 2009  
Written for 2009 Women's Sunday by Denise Michaels  
Kirkland Congregational Church United Church of Christ

I will always remember you running when we visit Kirkland United Church of Christ, and delighting in the other children as well as the elders like 97-year old Chuck Morgan we said good-bye to this January, and Lois, who gave us a lovely photo of a rainbow in Hawaii...and, of course, Cheyene, the youngest Gaskill girl.

I'll remember you running to the table for cookies and lemonade after church and showing me your Sunday school projects. Even now I smile to imagine you joyfully skipping out the door when we leave, asking: *What now, Nonni? What's next? Where will we go from here?*

I should tell you that I'm writing this for *Women's Sunday* to tell what it means to *me* to be a grandmother to *you* as well as a teacher and a poet—and to follow my calling in all these pathways, responding to what I'm called to do.

As you know, teaching is my calling and continues to inspire like last week in my college class, *Multicultural Communication*, when one of my students who'd been struggling and the first in her family to attend college, kept us engaged in discussion by coming to class prepared with notes on the essay, *Night to His Day—the Social Construction of Gender*. In the essay, Judith Lorber talks about what it means to have equality for women and men and work against sexism.

Sexism, Maizie, is when men and women, and girls and boys, become locked into roles because of their gender without equal opportunities. I was pleased that my student didn't shy away from the hard parts of the discussion or give in to people who dispute that sexism still exists.

For example, when I was a girl, though I was a fast runner, only my brother could join the high school track team. But your mommy was able to earn a scholarship based on track records at Juanita High School that still hold. Your mommy benefited from the passage of Title 9, a Federal law that protects a woman's right to equal access to sports scholarships. My student reminded us of the importance of laws to support justice. And she relied on ground rules she'd learned in our class.

Agreeing to ground rules, Maizie, is like practicing the *Golden Rule* that I know you remember means: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. Every faith has its version of the Golden Rule. As a teacher working with diverse students, this comforts me, so that I'm able to rely on what we share in common.

I know soon you'll move now that Daddy is coming back from Iraq. After you're settled into your new home, perhaps in El Paso, Texas, near Fort Bliss, I hope you'll read this letter from time to time to recall how fortunate you and I have been to attend UCC, *a call*

*in a way*, and an opportunity that began when your sister, Ciena, was born and you were just three years old.

Back then, you liked to sit in the front of the church near Cheyenne, the first person to welcome you and someone you looked up to like a big sister. And did you know that that's how Ciena looks up to you now?

Then you met Lucy, a first grader, and she became your best friend and together we'd share the same pew with her family and sign the friendship notebook with Gwynneth, one of Lucy's mommies. Sometimes after church we'd talk about what it means to be a family and we agreed that any two people could become family.

Do you remember that I first learned about UCC through its outreach to the homeless living in Tent City? Tent City is an encampment made up of homeless people who don't want to live on the streets, and so, for greater safety, pitch tents on the parking lots of local churches, synagogues and mosques.

We discussed how when people face challenges such as losing a job and not having rent money, it isn't fair to lose housing. Walter John, our former pastor, met with neighbors to assure them things would go well if they gave Tent City a chance in Kirkland. Fortunately there are people willing to step up to help others.

I'm so lucky, Maizie, to work with college students committed to community service, another calling, I believe. I know you remember that I went to New Orleans to gut houses with my students. You really wanted to go, too, and I'm proud of you for your desire to help. Sometimes you were able to accompany me to help as when we sorted clothes at the family center in Bothell. Thank you.

For Martin Luther King Day this year, thirty of my students built a storage shed for Maywood Hills Elementary. I'm proud of my students. They're receptive, bring their tools and exceed what I imagine. As I reflect back on the MLK day of service, I know hope is where two or more come together to take up the work at hand.

It's a mystery why you and I ended up at UCC.

*Not for us to understand*, Agostina Gonella Bianco, my Italian grandmother and *your* great-great grandmother, used to say me when I begged her, like you do sometimes, to tell me the reason.

But mostly, I valued the people's bold social justice stance toward Tent City. It made me feel hopeful. Maizie, *hopeful* is about seeing the good in something before others do, imagining potential even when there are problems. It's about trying to make things better. Sometimes, I ask myself: *What if the most important work is to keep hope alive?*

By the time we started coming to church here, Tent City had moved on to Spirit Lutheran, where you attended preschool. One day when I picked you up, you noticed the tents and rain tarps tethered to the bleak side of the church and asked: *Why does my preschool have band-aids on it?*

Even then, at four, you had the capacity to notice details and ask critical questions, for **housing people in tents**, though an improvement over living on the streets—is like putting band-aids on a problem. I hope you always expect more for people in need.

At preschool your teachers asked the children to name the colors of the apples they held in a basket. By the time it was your turn, all the colors—red, green, yellow, scarlet, topaz, had been spoken, yet you said: *Some apples have bruises*, this story meaningful to me because I'm a poet and felt your response came from that deep place—lyrical and heart-felt, where the word holds within itself a larger meaning.

Poetry is a call, Maizie, a call that declares: *Speak. Say it your way.*

Last February, the people of this church offered a blessing for your Daddy before he left for Iraq. You were there in the midst of the circle of church members that gathered in the center aisle, even Ciena. Everyone reached out as the blessing included a *laying on of hands*, that Ellie says has roots to ancient rites that go way back to the place of your Celtic ancestors.

You see, here at this church, Maizie, we experienced community, how to rely on a loving God, and remain loyal to a few good things.

And, there's so much more to write, Maizie—how I've treasured this time with you—that the people of this church are precious—how I'm sure I've failed to do all that I might to live up to the calls in my life—and that, for me, the calls to teach, write, pursue social justice and become a grand-parent are so entwined within me that I imagine them as close to my heart as my children and grandchildren—and woven into the core of my being so that I can no longer speak of poetry without touching the teacher within me, or speak of what it means to be a grandparent without embracing the path of social justice—

and that third candle on the altar we light every Sunday?—that was Walter John's idea sustained for one year by the people of this church and our new Pastors, Ana and Todd, lest we forget why we're here, to love one another, the mightiest call, to which we are all called. And Maizie, may you always run toward your future and what calls you.

Love, Noni