

## Maya Angelou: The Courage to Love



### Why the Caged Bird Sings

*The caged bird sings with a fearful trill  
of things unknown but longed for still  
and his tune is heard on the distant hill  
for the caged birds sings of freedom.*

- Paul Lawrence Dunbar, son of slaves (1899)

### Part I. Soul-deep Resilience

#### Doomed to captivity? Dealt a “bad hand” at birth?

Young, black Marguerite Johnson had *no* apparent aces—virtually *no* good cards at all—in her hand when she was born on April 4, 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri. Her mother, pretty, young Vivian, and her imposingly tall papa, Bailey, set off to seek their fortune—perhaps themselves living through some “winters of their discontent”—during the 1930s depression in California.

On top of that, their marriage foundered so that, seemingly without a second thought, Vivian packed her three-year-old daughter off on a train, accompanied only by her four-year-old brother, Bailey, to make the multi-day/night trip from Los Angeles to Arkansas. They had only a hand-scrawled note pinned to their chests saying that the kids were on their way to their paternal grandmother in the tiny rural town of Stamps, Arkansas. Today her parents would have been arrested. Back then? Well, no one cared much about little “nigger” kids, on a train all alone. Other black train passengers allegedly gave them food, water and some small comfort until ...

... they were met at the train station in Stamps by one Annie Henderson, henceforth known as “Momma”. Maya’s “Momma” was actually her paternal grandmother who, even though a black woman in the sleepy, deeply segregated South, outright *owned* the only black general store in the town. She was, by all accounts, a commanding presence. Maya said much later on, “**One needs noble heroes**” in one’s formative years and hers (like mine) was her grandmother.

#### ***To the saving grace of “Granma’s”***

*To that I can sing hymns of praise! My saving grace, too, was my Granma Cora and, here I want to pay her tribute. She was the “noble hero” who most certainly salvaged my young life when there was no father—only a fake one—and a biological mother who abandoned me after birth to go back to her glitzy “showbiz” world. If it hadn’t been for granma ...*

*From my infancy, she took over my care and, until my twenties, lived her life parallel to ours—always in her own house just close by—when we moved south from New York to Louisiana, then Texas where I went to school until leaving for college in California.*

*She had never been to college ... but she helped me to go. And, like Queen Elizabeth II, she followed the precept, "Never complain, never explain." That she "never explained" did cause deep wounds, but she did share her love and made it visible in actions.*

**Poor little black girl: from the "Jim Crow" South to wild St. Louis and back.**

Marguerite and brother Bailey lived in the deeply segregated South for the next several years of their lives under the protective wing of their "Momma" who created for them a "strict and sheltered environment" revolving around her general store, their school and the church (never mind the ever-threatening Ku Klux Klan!).

Desultory names for Negroes in the Deep South of America's 1930s: "niggers", "jigs", "dinges", "blackbirds", "crows", "boots" and "spooks." – "Caged Bird"

Then in 1933, out of the blue, father Bailey Sr. flamboyantly "arrived" in Arkansas and whisked his kids off to live with their mother in the "new and wild" African-American neighborhood of St. Louis where, we are told by biographer, Donna Brown Agins, "people carried guns and sold illegal whiskey and lottery tickets in the streets." Father Bailey Sr.—no surprise—went back to California, leaving the children with their mother who "worked as a card dealer in the gambling parlors". Not the best environment.

Then, when Marguerite was only eight, that unspeakable thing happened. **Rape.**

Mama Vivian, Maya later said, "was far too beautiful to spend her time looking after children", but she did have boyfriends. One live-in guy, an older paunchy Southerner named Freeman, worked in the railroad yards. Maya—or "Ritie" as she was then called, short for Marguerite—had gotten used to him, even climbing into bed with the couple when she had nightmares.

Once when he found himself alone with her in the bed, he got a "hard on" and even showed it to her: "his 'thing' stood up like a brown ear of corn, mushy and squirmy," she later related. But when he held her close, she realized that she actually *liked* the physical contact, even when he panted, then masturbated and came; that meant that he cared for her. Or *did* it? She was totally confused, over-whelmed and unable to sort out either his behavior or her child's emotions. This made her prime prey; and he became a predator.

Below are some sobering facts we didn't want to know back then ... or even now.

To graphic designer (GD): Below should be a SINGLE Box with text-box-anchored photo.

## Child sexual abuse in America: The rampant “taboo” of our times

Worldwide, nearly one in five girls is sexually abused at least once in her lifetime. In the United States, 18% of girls report that, by age 17, they have been victims of a sexual assault or abuse. Child sexual abuse is gender-skewed towards females.

### The Staggering Facts. The victims:

- One in 3 girls and 1 in 5 boys becomes a victim of child sexual abuse before his or her 18th birthday. 90% of child sexual abuse victims know the perpetrator in some way. 30% of sexual abuse is never reported.
- Child abuse occurs at every socio-economic level, across ethnic and cultural lines, within all religions and at all levels of education. However, the highest incidence is with native American children and people of color; the riskiest places are in the South-Southwest (Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Alabama).
- Nearly 70% of all reported sexual assaults occur to children aged 17 and under. Some 20% of the victims of sexual abuse are under age eight.
- There is worse lasting emotional damage when a child’s sexual abuse started before the age of six and lasted for several years. Among child and teen victims of sexual abuse, there is a 42% increased chance of suicidal thoughts during adolescence.



### The Staggering Facts. The perpetrators:

- Although 95% of abuse might be preventable through education and awareness, this does not happen because it is a **taboo** topic.
- Approximately three percent of men in America are active sexual predators. They use their age, size, position and physical power to intimidate their victims, in addition to psychological dominance, control, manipulation and threats as part of their exploitive attacks.
- A typical pedophile will commit 117 sexual crimes in a lifetime.
- “There are nearly half a million registered sex offenders in the U.S. but 80,000 to 100,000 of them are missing. Why? Because 30% of sexual abuse is never reported, so 70% of the perpetrators go unpunished.
- Sources: <https://www.unicefusa.org/what-unicef-does/childrens-protection>  
<https://www.unicef.org/media/89206/file/CSAE-Brief-v3.pdf> and  
[https://laurenskids.org/awareness/about-faqs/facts-and-stats/#:~:text=“There%20are%20nearly%20half%20a,”%20\(National%20Sex%20offenders%20Registry\)](https://laurenskids.org/awareness/about-faqs/facts-and-stats/#:~:text=“There%20are%20nearly%20half%20a,”%20(National%20Sex%20offenders%20Registry))

Thus it happened that one spring morning, when both Bailey Jr. and Vivian were not home, Freeman raped Marguerite. Here’s her own description later captured in her first—and most famous—autobiography, *“I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”*:

*"Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight-year-old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot."*

Not only that. Freeman threatened her that if she screamed or dared tell anyone, he would kill first her and then her brother, Bailey, as well. Beside the bleeding and physical pain was the paralysis, guilt, confusion and fear that children often experience when things happen that are beyond their ability to comprehend or put into proper perspective. From her later works (the poem "Men", 1971), we see that she was emotionally shattered in a way that forever scarred her.

**Note to Graphic Designer: Pls insert the boxed text below as a side bar with pale gray background so that it doesn't break the Maya narrative.**

### **On a painfully personal note**

As Maya said, *"There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."*

*And so, I will briefly tell you mine. From about age six to eleven, I, too, was a victim of child sexual abuse. From an alleged father who was NOT my father (but I didn't know that until years later). A clear, one-off rape, blood, court testimony, murder and all, it was NOT. This was more subtle, secretive and enduring; nevertheless, it was RAPE. Most assuredly, the rape of my innocence. Here's how it felt:*

*"He's in my bed again. Willie. Why do I hate it so, when he sneaks in like this? He's my father so it must be okay that he loves me in this way; but it isn't! I know there's something wrong here. I also feel the strange sensuality that I don't understand and the power it gives me, even over my own mother. He wants me.*

*Mama's outside watering the parched, nighttime-Texas lawn. He creeps under the sheet, grabs my hand and puts it on his quivering 'thing'. I pull back but he won't let me. He fondles me inside my pajamas. He is sort of panting; I am paralyzed and want to throw up. Before I even can, he comes in my hand. All sticky warm and smelly.*

*Just then, the bedroom door opens and there stands my mother! "I know what you're doing!" she cries out. But then, instead of rescuing me—taking us forever away from this recurrent nightmare world—she turns around, slams the door and leaves. He just turns his back on her and says to me, "Don't you dare tell anybody. Anyway, they'd never believe you."*

*So I didn't. Not until I was twelve ... and "read him the riot act". Only then did he back off. But these secret, pre-pubescent sexual encounters with a man assumed to be my father violated my innocence—indeed, shame-branded my entire sexual life. I have no other way to describe it. It was far beyond my ability to understand, but I did feel both the pull and the power associated with sexuality. The perpetrators have no clue what harm they inflict!*

*Finally, at age 19, I found out that—in fact, he wasn't even my father!!! What a relief! I couldn't 'inherit' his pedophilia. But my mother was condemned a liar while my Granma thought she was 'protecting' me by not explaining.*

With Marguerite, it was vastly different. This was one brutal act and there was no one to whom to turn ... except her brother Bailey who was also but a child. She told him and he cried; then she told her other grandmother (Baxter) who called the police. Freeman was arrested and stood trial; Marguerite stood up to his threat and testified against him in court. Sentence: only one year and a day ... but he never served it. Why? Because while he was on bail, he was tracked down in an empty lot and kicked to death. Yes, *kicked*. Probably by her male uncles; no one ever found out. But the deed was done. And she, utterly traumatized.

**“Crime and Punishment” ... and more.** Marguerite, as many children do, somehow felt that the whole thing had been *her* fault; that her words in court had directly caused his death! So if her words had the power to kill, then she decided never to talk again, except to Bailey. This she did, too, for five long years! And yet, it was during this very silent period that Maya developed her extraordinary memory, love for books and literature, and keen ability to listen and observe the world around her.



### Maya's inner resilience

#### *A Jungian Psychoanalyst's Take on Childhood Sexual Trauma and Recovery*

*Although my own activity as Psychosocial Counselor is based on Viktor Frankl, I have also engaged in very valuable work in Jungian psychoanalysis, which is the revival of contemporary American psychoanalyst, Donald Kalsched. His book, *The Inner World of Trauma: Archetypal Defences of the Personal Spirit*, defines such a trauma as "the rupture of those developmental transitions that make life worth living" and sees this as a spiritual, as well as a psychological, challenge to be overcome.*

Here some Jungian insights into how a sexual trauma victim's *inner self-care system* psychologically tries to intervene to save the personal spirit:

*When a child is subjected to abuse, neglect, being shamed or not being "seen" by parents or caregivers, the pain of rejection may be more than its system can bear. So part of the psyche—that innocent, tender, feeling, relating part that feels pain so intensely—"dissociates"; that is, splits off, locks itself away, encapsulates.*

*A "caretaker" system takes over to protect the child from future re-traumatization by shaming/warning it into avoiding deep human relationships. This protection, unfortunately, usually lasts into adulthood, keeping the adult from forming deep, mutually enriching relationships.*

*Healing comes only when the adult slowly learns to trust a new figure -- the inner child re-kindles hope while the now-adult learns to trust human relationships despite their defects. In this long process, the personal spirit must also grow into taking responsibility for a better caretaker system that recognizes the ways in which it has sabotaged itself. Over time, the possibility of deeper human relationship to others, and to the associated creativity and feeling, opens up. It takes time but ...*

*Viktor Frankl might even call this the slow dance of "self-transcendence".*

The only silver lining was that her superficially 'overtaxed' mother sent them both back to the safety of "Momma" Henderson in Arkansas. But Maya saw it differently. She felt



that she had crept “right off the end of the world” and into the “cocoon” that was Stamps with its soul-deep resignation at life’s inequities. All hope gone.

There she stayed with Bailey, obscured and mute, yet silently healing, benefitting even from the rural serenity of “no questions asked”. But then, just when least awaited, came an unexpected blessing in the form of two exceptional women—one black, one white—who showed the “tender-hearted” (i.e. highly sensitive) Ritie what a better world could look like—and NOT—and encouraged her to trust herself again and step into it.

**YES to Maya’s “first lifeline”.** This, when Ritie encountered the sole well-educated, “black aristocrat” of Stamps, a woman named Bertha Flowers, who all but served as a divine intervention for the girl! She appeared as if out of nowhere when Ritie was about ten and still mute. Maya described her as *“one of the few gentlewomen I have ever known, and she has remained throughout my life the measure of what a human being can be”*. Then she added, *“it didn’t occur to me for many years that they (Ms. Flowers and my ‘Momma’) were as alike as sisters, separated only by formal education.”*

**The spiritual pivot.** Ms. Flowers intuited something noble in Ritie and decided to call it forth if she could. *“Now no one is going to make you talk,”* she conceded right away, *“but bear in mind that **language** is man’s way of communication ... still, it takes more than words; it takes the human **voice** to infuse them with shades of deeper meaning.”*

She gave Ritie a book, told her to commit a poem to memory and recite it for her at their next meeting. That was the auspicious beginning. It was she who encouraged Ritie to read, recite poetry and, at last, begin to speak aloud again. In 1940, Ritie graduated at the top of her class. En route, seeing that she was liked, respected even, Ms. Flowers opened a welcoming door, and Ritie arose and walked through it.

### **Helen Keller and Maya Angelou—Striking Similarities!**

Although they both were children of America’s rural South, these two were so utterly different in terms of opportunities ensuing from their differing heritages, races, early life traumas and social standing. Still, both were “caged birds”! Helen by her blind/deafness; Maya by her trauma and station in life. But both overcame in resplendent fashion.

If we look at the self-transcendence of both Maya Angelou and Helen Keller before her, there are some amazing similarities! The importance of **language** is one of them! Both had to learn the hard way. **Writing** and **speaking—performing** even!—were others. Both women were wonderful wordsmiths and artists! Each had a very particular style and story to tell... and each told it for the ages!

Finally, worth more than just “honorable mention” here is **mentoring**—because one’s gifts long to be shared and passed on. While Helen had her Anne Sullivan and Mark Twain, Maya had her Bertha Flowers and Martin Luther King, Jr. Plus, Maya went on to deeply mentor others: especially Oprah Winfrey, Tavis Smiley and others *incognito*.

**NO to Maya’s “finishing school” in a white woman’s kitchen.** Viola Cullinan was a white woman from a wealthy Virginia family who had allegedly “married beneath her station” and ended up in “the sticks” of Arkansas. Nevertheless, “the exactness of her

house was inhuman”: meals on the precise minute, every item of the lavish service in its impeccably immovable place... and Ritie had to learn all this with the help of Glory, a black descendant of the slaves who had served that family for generations. Even though Ritie soon noted that her mistress “drank alcohol out of unmarked bottles ... to keep herself embalmed” because of the reproductive organs she had sacrificed in an earlier operation that rendered her barren, she dared not rebel. Until one day ....

Mrs. Cullinan and her white lady friends lounging on the porch started speaking about Ritie as if she weren’t even *there*. One lady allowed as to how “Margaret” was too long a name, and she would just cut it to “Mary”, which Mrs. Cullinan tried out. She *shouldn’t* have. This ultimate act of **disrespect** provoked Ritie to her first blatant insubordination when she quite intentionally dropped the precious Virginia porcelain onto the tile floor and broke the dishes right before Mrs. Cullinan’s horrified eyes! For that act she was fired ... but finally got back her proper, respected name, Margaret. *Little things can mean a lot ...because they’re not* “little”.

**A new Marguerite emerges.** More peripatetic changes. This time in the protective company of “Momma”, the siblings returned to California, joining their biological mother in the San Francisco Bay area. Vivian had re-married, this time to a better man, “Daddy Clidell”, who proved a loving father figure to his wife’s children.

In her teens, a more confident Marguerite emerged. Studying drama and dance on a scholarship, then going to San Diego to visit her dad and his young girlfriend, she ended up breaking out on her own, soon becoming the first black streetcar conductor in San Francisco, then getting pregnant at just sixteen after a one-night stand. Talk about “bad cards”! Or was this the very opening that part of her may have longed for?

***“Freedom and responsibility are reverse sides of the same coin.”***

-  
Viktor Frankl

Maya’s first autobiography, ***“I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings”***—her “poignant story that made literary history as the first non-fiction bestseller by a Black woman” in America—ends here, on precisely this note. And with a quote that is incredibly relevant precisely in today’s world; one that some current figures on the world stage would do well to embrace before it is too late, not only for their own egocentric selves but also for their country’s citizens and the wider world as well.

## Getting Real, Growing Up

*“For eons, it seemed, I had accepted my plight as the hapless, put-upon victim of fate and the Furies, but this time I had to face the fact that I had brought my new catastrophe upon myself. How was I to blame the innocent? ...*

*In order to be profoundly dishonest, a person must have one of two qualities: either he is **unscrupulously ambitious**, or he is **unswervingly egocentric**. He must believe that, for his ends to be served, all things and people can justifiably be shifted about, or that he is the center not only of his own world but of the worlds which others inhabit.”*

*- Maya Angelou (in 1944 at age sixteen)*



## Part II. Maya's Phoenix Rises

*"One isn't necessarily born with courage, but one is born with potential. Without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous or honest."*  
- Maya Angelou

**Blooming, Growing.** So, starting with her own one-night stand teenage pregnancy, Maya took on courage's responsibility and brought her son, Clyde (later called Guy), into the world as a single, unemployed mother when she was only seventeen.

Then came a period of multiple short-term jobs and haphazardly unstable relationships. In 1952, at 24 and against her mother's advice, she married Tosh Angelos, a white man of Greek descent, but the marriage survived less than three years. Out of money, she had to find work again and turned to nightclub dancing, making her way to the then-famous "Purple Onion" in San Francisco and performing Cuban calypso. She became popular and, one special night, the cast from George Gershwin's Broadway show, "Porgy and Bess" came to watch her. They bonded and soon after, she was offered a contract with the musical to tour 22 countries! But, in order to do that, she had to leave her nine-year-old son with her flaky mother, Vivian, in California so that essentially the abandonment she had suffered would be repeated with her only child.

*"Calypso Maya" at the Purple*

*Onion*



**Public success, private failure.** Maya's career breakthrough came when she was twenty-six in 1954. The "Porgy and Bess" cast went on its world tour, visiting such countries as Canada, Italy, France, Spain, Yugoslavia, Egypt, Greece and Israel. She seemed finally to have "arrived" and was at last experiencing a more tolerant world—for example in Egypt and later Ghana—where societies did not discriminate against her skin color. On the contrary.

However, at home all was not well. Clyde was ill with some sort of psychosomatic skin disorder; her mother was getting ready to take off for some Las Vegas casino and her brother Bailey had been put behind bars for selling stolen goods. She had to get home. She did, was reunited with Clyde and promised herself never to leave him again.

But Destiny was beginning to call her ... with its seductive New York song! And, as Donna Brown Agins tells us, Maya was becoming ever more convinced that ***"life loves the person who dares to live it!"***

**Destination New York.** "Where the rubber hits the road" as in that famous Frank Sinatra song, "If I can make it there, I'll make it Anywhere, It's up to you, New York!" The

year was 1957 so Maya was just going on thirty. She and Guy moved to Brooklyn and her writing started in earnest at the Harlem Writers Guild.

It's also the first time she was introduced to America's Civil Rights Movement ... thus, the beginning of a long and arduous journey on behalf of herself and her Black nation. She soon used her "Porgy and Bess" stage skills to mount a "Cabaret for Freedom!" in the summer of 1960 in support of Martin Luther King, Jr. who even came to visit her in New York and invited her to get more closely involved with the SCLC (i.e. Southern Christian Leadership Conference).



**MLK Jr. was assassinated on 4 April 1968, Maya's fortieth birthday.**

Only then something unexpected occurred: she met South African freedom fighter, Vusumzi Make ("Vus"), and that once again changed the course of her budding life. After only a week, he proposed, vowing he would take her to activist Africa ... and she severed her current engagement and said "Yes" to a life of adventure!

**"Destiny": Up close and personal**  
I know what *that* feels like! (Not everybody *does*.)

*I, too, was engaged to be married into a super-rich, conservative East Texas family. Then, out of the blue, in a senior-year university seminar on the History of European Ideas, I suddenly heard that German-accented male voice behind me, answering a question that had us all baffled; then, I turned around and saw Peter and ... that was THAT! Engagement off, European adventure on. That moment changed my life.*

*"In the flush of love's light, we dare to be brave, and suddenly we see that love costs all we are and will ever be. Yet, it is only love which sets us free."*  
*Maya Angelou*

Maya, too, was swept off her feet ... and into an entirely new world: Africa! Political activism! Still, she was "an independent, outspoken American woman" as Agins tells us, and she didn't deal dutifully with her husband's "insistence on being in command".

This is perhaps the best moment to get into one of the mysteries of Maya's life: men.

**All Maya's Men ... and why she may have *bounced* them.** We are told that Maya married three times—literally or symbolically—in her life: first, to Greek carpenter Tosh Angelos (1949-52); second to South African activist Vusumzi L. Make (1960-63); and third to Welsh writer and cartoonist, Paul du Feu (1973-80), who had been previously married to Australian feminist and author, Germaine Greer.

*"I know that I'm not the easiest person to live with."*

*- Maya's self-assessment regarding intimate male relationships.*

By all accounts, Maya was a physical "force of nature": her tall, statuesquely swaying on-stage mahogany body and her deep, mellifluous speaking and singing voice—rediscovered after a mute five years—that was later described by Tavis Smiley as "more than mellow ... musical, nuanced, dramatic, warm, inquisitive ... endlessly enthralling." In short, she was **sexy**. And yet ...

Despite all her commanding presence, appeal and allure, she had little luck with men. She tried ... with varying degrees of failure. Why? Often, she seems to have gotten involved with men who tried to dominate, subdue and "put her in her place" . But she was not the subservient type and, once again, could not be contained in this small domestic "cage" where a bird might sing but not a **phoenix rise!**

**ANCHOR PHOTOS TO CAPTIONS!**

**Maya, towering over other guests at the Betty Ford White House in 1976.**



Could it be that a single childhood sexual trauma—rape at age eight that led to the violent death of her perpetrator—resulted, not only in Maya's instantaneous mutism that lasted five years, but also to sexual and trust-related difficulties in forming lasting relationships? Yes, it could. And, indeed, often does. Here the proof is in the writing. This poem was written for her 1971 collection (i.e. she was under 50); the rape had taken place when she was eight ... yet it never left her psyche (any more than my child sexual abuse did *mine*).

**Format this poem as the other two, in two equal columns... or take the full text OUT and just reference the poem.**

## **Men**

When I was young, I used to  
Watch behind the curtains  
As men walked up and down the street.  
Wino men, old men. Young men sharp as mustard.  
See them. Men are always  
Going somewhere.  
They knew I was there. Fifteen  
Years old and starving for them.

Under my window, they would pause,  
Their shoulders high like the  
Breasts of a young girl,  
Jacket tails slapping over  
Those behinds,  
Men.

One day they hold you in the  
Palms of their hands, gentle, as if you  
Were the last raw egg in the world. Then  
They tighten up. Just a little. The  
First squeeze is nice. A quick hug.  
Soft into your defenselessness. A little  
More. The hurt begins. Wrench out a  
Smile that slides around the fear. When the  
Air disappears,  
Your mind pops, exploding fiercely, briefly,  
Like the head of a kitchen match. Shattered.  
It is your juice  
That runs down their legs. Staining their shoes.  
When the earth rights itself again,  
And taste tries to return to the tongue,  
Your body has slammed shut. Forever.  
No keys exist.

Then the window draws full upon  
Your mind. There, just beyond  
The sway of curtains, men walk.  
Knowing something.  
Going someplace.  
But this time, I will simply  
Stand and watch.

Maybe.

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My take on this poem and the way it perceives men? It is so undeniably infused with the after-effects of Maya's childhood rape—breaching such sacred barriers—that even the words are similar: “hold you gentle,” then “tighten up”, “first squeeze”, “quick hug”, “a

smile that slides around the fear”. Then, the “hurt begins”; “your mind pops” ... “shattered”. “Your body slammed shut. Forever. No keys exist.”

One analysis (<https://poemanalysis.com>) sees the poem as a “powerful indictment of the patriarchal society that allows men to objectify and exploit women” ... that “also speaks to the lasting impact of sexual violence on its victims”. The approach is *confrontational*, the language “unflinching”, disdainful even, but dangerously urgent.

*At fifteen, this was also my own survivor’s “disconnect” strategy. Back then I was the “cold-as-ice-princess”. No male—no matter the age or seeming suaveness—could even get near me. “Slammed shut”, no keys. Young boys must have thought me stuck up ... but I was mistrustfully afraid for my life! As for them, they sauntered and swaggered but they couldn’t get near me. In a way, they still can’t. I still don’t know where those more-than-friendship keys are.*

**Escaping into a Silver-tongued Cage.** One has to read between the lines—and reflect—to see that Maya flew back *into* a cage of sorts—a verbal one—to save herself. She did what master negotiators do: they learn, in the thick of the fray, to distance themselves, to “go to the balcony” and re-group. And what is Maya’s poetry if not a view from way up “on high” on the state of a world from which she is separate?

So, leaving the rude-crude physical behind, latest in mid-life, Maya “ascended” intellectually, soaring on the poetic wings of her hard-won wisdom.

*I believe that each of us comes from the creator trailing wisps of glory.*

*Maya Angelou, age 65*

Did she muster the “courage to love” as she often debated with mentee Tavis Smiley? That depends on what **kind** of love one means. As the Greeks defined it, love has at least seven variations that we needn’t delve too deeply into here. Suffice it to say that:

- **Eros**—that “dangerously passionate”, romantically procreative, highly sensual erotic kind doesn’t seem to have worked for Maya since her three formal relationships produced no further children and all ended in divorce;
- **Storge**—that familial kind of love between siblings, parents and children was certainly there, especially with her brother, Bailey, and grandmother “Momma”; later even with Maya’s mother whom she forgave for her early failures; but **Philia** (deep friendship) and **Pragma** (longstanding love) beyond the familial boundaries seem to have eluded her. And yet ...
- **Agape**—that generous-spirited, selfless, universal lovingkindness that one extends to all living beings that are seen as blessing, whatever their state or status; even that unconditional, eternal love used to describe God’s love for humanity, without expecting anything in return; arguably the purest, highest, deepest type of love there is. That, she seems to have achieved. And here, writing was increasingly Maya’s medium.

**Writing** was her favorite field and her lifelong focus lay in overcoming the prejudice, discrimination and abuse—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual—that result from ignorance. She went at it with a “spiritual defiance” that would have made even patriarch Viktor Frankl blink twice!

**Feminine “spiritual defiance”.** Her own femininity is a theme that runs through Maya Angelou’s life—not just as a sparkling brook on the surface, as she might have had us believe with her 1978 poem “**Phenomenal Woman**”—but also as a deep, dark subterranean well that just might have been contaminated by that rape at eight that left its indelible scars. The bravado of her poem—“*you can look but don’t touch!*”—somehow does not allow anyone “in”, does it?

GD: The poem should be laid out in two equal columns, perhaps with a photo.

## Phenomenal Woman

By Maya Angelou

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.  
I’m not cute or built to suit a fashion model’s size  
But when I start to tell them,  
They think I’m telling lies.  
I say,  
It’s in the reach of my arms,  
The span of my hips,  
The stride of my step,  
The curl of my lips.  
I’m a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That’s me.

I walk into a room  
Just as cool as you please,  
And to a man,  
The fellows stand or  
Fall down on their knees.  
Then they swarm around me,  
A hive of honey bees.  
I say,  
It’s the fire in my eyes,  
And the flash of my teeth,  
The swing in my waist,  
And the joy in my feet.  
I’m a woman  
Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

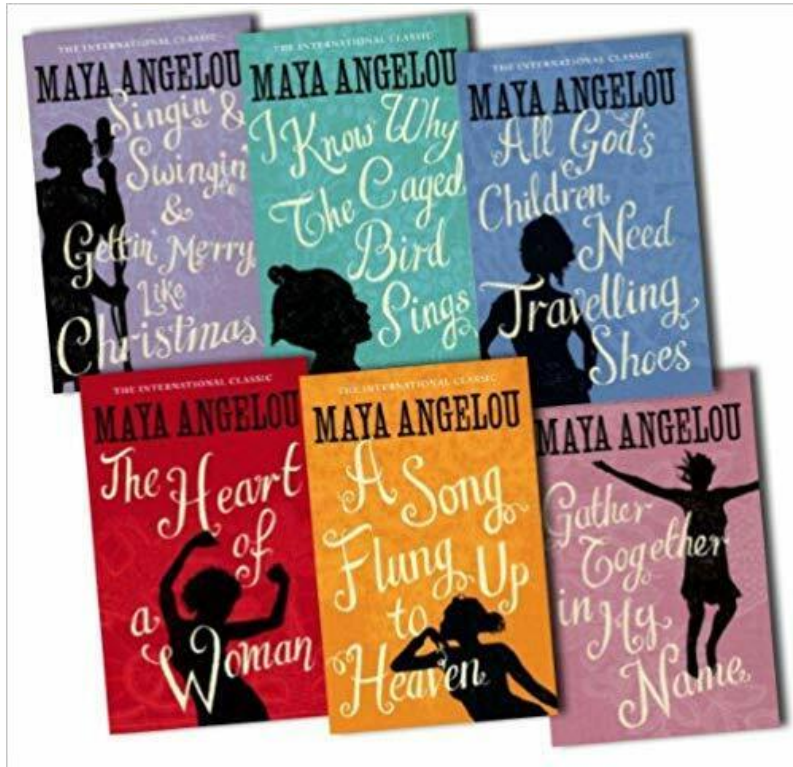
Men themselves have wondered  
What they see in me.  
They try so much  
But **they can't touch**  
My inner mystery.  
When I try to show them,  
They say they still can't see.  
I say,  
It's in the arch of my back,  
The sun of my smile,  
The ride of my breasts,  
The grace of my style.  
I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Now you understand  
Just why my head's not bowed.  
I don't shout or jump about  
Or have to talk real loud.  
When you see me passing,  
It ought to make you proud.  
I say,  
It's in the click of my heels,  
The bend of my hair,  
the palm of my hand,  
The need for my care.  
'Cause I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.

Maya Angelou, "Phenomenal Woman" from *And Still I Rise*. Copyright © 1978 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.  
Source: *The Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou* (Random House Inc., 1994)

Maya's best men were those beyond gender and thus asexual: they were simply soul mates like her brother, Bailey Jr., or they were black icons like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X where she was invited into their inner circles ... but only shortly before they were both assassinated in an over-the-top, racially aggressive America.





### Maya's Writings and more—but a sample

Maya's serious writing started when she moved to New York at age thirty with her son and realized that she wanted to do something more meaningful than just entertain.

Between then and the end of her life at 86 years of age in 2014, she published **nine** autobiographies, including two cookbooks, **eight** collections of poetry, **six** dramatic works, **three** children's books, **three** recordings and three "public poems"—one of them for

President Bill Clinton's 1993 inauguration and one for the United Nations' fiftieth anniversary in 1995.

Interspersed, there were many exotic adventures—especially to Africa in the 1960s—and encounters that blossomed into endearing mentorships. During the 1980s, she taught and received honorary doctorates at a number of American universities, notably Wake Forest in Winston-Salem, NC where she moved in 1981 and where she passed away in 2014.

**Racial "spiritual defiance"**. As we know, once Maya found the courage to speak again, she was outspoken, even outrageously so! Below one of her most defiant poems—about slavery—where she defends her "sassiness" and "haughtiness" without a trace of humiliation.

**GD: This poem should also be laid out in two equal columns, perhaps with a photo.**

### Still I Rise

By Maya Angelou

You may write me down in history  
 With your bitter, twisted lies,  
 You may trod me in the very dirt  
 But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
 Why are you beset with gloom?

'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room  
Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

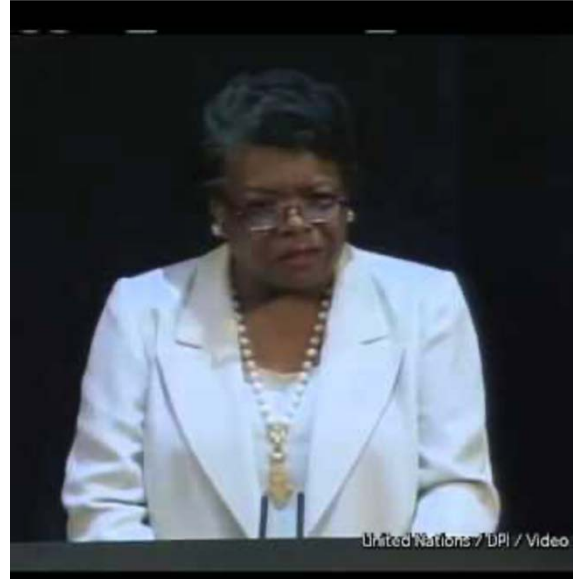
Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise" from *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*. Copyright © 1978 by Maya Angelou. Used by permission of Random House, an imprint and division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

**On a Personal Note. I was *there!***

When, in June 1995, '*A Brave and Startling Truth*' was emphatically delivered *in person* by [Maya Angelou](#) before the United Nations General Assembly on the occasion of its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I was actually *there* in the audience! I still recall the "buzz".

This powerful and *empowering* poem that instantly inspired us as listeners to re-ignite that bright light of promise within each of us to create and sustain a peaceful world—actually our own deep U.N. *commitment*—

... but she started with the opposite; that is, the vulnerability of life on our planet:



We, this people, *on a small and lonely planet*

*Traveling through casual space*

*Past aloof stars, across the way of indifferent suns ...*

We, this people, *on this minuscule and kithless globe...*

We, this people *on this mote of matter...*

We, this people, *on this small and drifting planet...*

We, this people, *on this wayward, floating body...*

**GD: ANCHOR PHOTO TO TEXT!**

Before laying out the promise that if and when we grow to manifest ...

*that "bold and startling truth" will we*

Have the power to fashion for this earth ...

And confess that WE are the possible, the miraculous,  
the true wonder of this world (but)

That is *when, and only when*

*We come to it.*

- Maya Angelou, 1995, United Nations, New York

Last years, looking back. Tavis Smiley, one of many younger personalities she mentored, captured some poignant conversations they shared in Maya's final years about courage, love and death. "I have found the courage to open unknown doors, ... to explore new places... the adventure itself required courage... but, *baby,*" she told him in a dream shortly *after* she died, "*we find our path by walking it.*"

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## 9. Maya Angelou. Readers' Interactive Workbook

Whatever your age or current stage of life, interacting with historic or contemporary characters can inspire your own life, calling up comparisons with the figures featured here. Take a vivid “walk down Memory Lane” and recall challenges that you faced—whether you overcame them or just barely survived? Or have your very challenges transformed you into a new and stronger person? This can help you rev up your right-now resilience. *Dare to explore **beyond** Maya Angelou’s “spiritual defiance”.*

**1. Your “living story”.** How old are you, the reader, right now? On which rung of life’s ladder are you standing? Are you surrounded by a good, close family that supports you unequivocally? Or something less ideal? How does your family and place in society affect your well-being and future prospects? How could you improve them?

**2. Thresholds.** According to some psychologists, there are certain “thresholds” we must all cross towards maturity as a person. How do the stories you hear—and tell about *yourself* on Instagram or so—tend to form your personal narrative? And wait! Have you maybe been telling the **wrong** ones? Or **old** ones now worn out? How can you identify these and change your living story?

**3. Dealing with trauma, that “rupture of the normal developmental transitions that make life worth living”.** Have you suffered trauma of any kind? Physical? Mental? Spiritual? Environmental? How have you/are you coping? Do role models help?

**4. Maya as a “true Renaissance woman”?** Maya was nothing if not versatile and self-transforming: singer, dancer, poet, master chef ... civil rights activist! Rather than being a narrow specialist, she heartily believed in being a “jack of all trades”; we should all do it! Do you? What new area of activity might be calling you right now?

**5. Transitioning.** After the “spiritual defiance” of such poems as “Phenomenal Woman” and “Still I Rise”, how did Maya embrace **aging wisely and gracefully** (rather than aggressively), both for herself and her Black race?

**6. Existential question that Maya oft debated with her mentee, Tavis Smiley:** What comes first—love or courage? Why?

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