

Maya Angelou Sings Songs of Love

In an exclusive interview with Science of Mind, Dr. Angelou shares insights into her spiritual life and the lessons that have enabled her to overcome personal tragedies and societal barriers to create an elegant life and inspire generations. Science of Mind proudly honors Dr. Maya Angelou as our Spiritual Hero for 2013.

CLAUDIA ABBOTT

In 1969, the year when *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* was first published, the United States was immersed in a cauldron of resistance, racial tension, bigotry, violence, and separation. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had codified much-needed legislation to end racial segregation, but the work was far from over. The assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Senator Robert F. Kennedy were fresh wounds in the nation's psyche. Peaceful protests were met with violence across the South, and riots erupted in major urban centers like Watts in Los

Angeles, giving evidence of the molten lava of disease festering for centuries in the melting pot of American life.

At the age of forty, Maya Angelou did not intend to write an autobiography. A poet and playwright, she had worked for the civil rights movement and was involved with theater and television projects aimed at raising social awareness. But she balked at the idea of writing about her own life when approached by Random House editor Robert Loomis. After several attempts to convince her to share her incredible story, Loomis commented, "You may be right not to attempt



Maya Angelou & Angela Davis

an autobiography, because it is nearly impossible to write autobiography as literature." Angelou had decided at an early age that *can't* was not going to be a part of her vocabulary, and she remembered her grandmother's words, "Nothing beats a trial but a failure." She accepted the challenge, and the first of the seven volumes of her autobiography was born.

I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings immediately became a best seller. A nation hungry for understanding was captivated by Angelou's exacting and vivid description of life in the rural, Depression-era South where

she felt imprisoned by walls of segregation and bigotry, but also graced by the richness of the African-American traditions, community, spiritual life, and love that supported her. The book is the coming-of-age story of a young girl, Marguerite Johnson, born April 4, 1928, who was destined to achieve fame as Maya Angelou—dancer, singer, actress, playwright, speaker, teacher, and the master of two literary genres: poetry and the autobiography.

*The caged bird sings / of things
unknown / but longed for still—
"The Caged Bird,"* from *Shaker,
Why Don't You Sing?*

The story that launched her epic autobiography began when the three-year-old girl was separated from her mother and ended when she became a mother herself at the age of seventeen. In 1931, with their marriage coming to a stormy end, her parents decided to send their children, via train, from Long Beach, California, to Stamps, Arkansas, to be raised by their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson. With identification and destination tags secured to their tiny wrists, Maya and her brother Bailey, age four, were cast off on the long journey alone, with no adult supervision or companionship. Although the early years in Stamps were filled with feelings of abandonment, there was also love and nurturing.

In my Missouri / I had known a mean man—"In My Missouri" from I Shall Not Be Moved

When the children were seven and eight, they were taken by their father and deposited in St. Louis, Missouri, to live with their mother's family. Life in Missouri was a state of misery for the young child, whose brother had called her "My a Sister," a name that evolved into Maya. The home of the maternal family, the Baxters, was alien

to the shy girl who missed the woman she called Momma, her grandmother Annie. The Baxters were an influential family in the black neighborhood. Their grandmother was a precinct captain and wielded political influence; the grandfather, an immigrant from Trinidad, taught his children the importance of knowing how to fight. The result was that the Baxters were a tough lot. Vivian, Maya and Bailey's mother, was the eldest child in the family. Her father was proud of her boyish, fearless personality, and she became a model of violent power for her younger brothers. You didn't mess with the Baxters.

When Maya was only seven and a half, her mother's boyfriend violated her and threatened to kill her beloved Bailey if she told anyone. She recounted the trauma: "I stopped speaking at the age of seven. I stopped speaking because I had been raped, and I told the name of my rapist to my brother, who told the family. The man stayed in jail one day and one night, and then he was released. A few days later, the police came to my maternal grandmother's house and told my mother's mother that the man had been found dead; it seemed that he had been kicked to death." The children sensed that the uncles

were responsible for the man's death. "My seven-and-a-half-years' logic told me that my voice killed a man, and so it was better if I did not speak. So I didn't speak. I spoke to my brother, because, somehow, I knew that his love for me and mine for him prevented any curse from hurting either of us. But otherwise, my voice could just go out the keyhole and kill people randomly. After a few months, my mother's people sent me and my brother back to my paternal grandmother in Arkansas."

Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave / I am the dream and the hope of the slave / I rise—"Still I Rise" from And Still I Rise

In Stamps, it was her grandmother's love and faith that enveloped Maya in a cocoon of security. She shared her grandmother's words and their impact: "My grandmother would braid my hair the way that all black ladies still braid their babies' hair. I'd sit on the floor and Momma would sit on a chair, and she would brush my hair. And she would say, 'Sister, Momma don't care what people say 'bout you must be a moron and you must be an idiot because you can't talk. Sister, Momma don't care. Momma knows when you and the Lord get ready, you

gonna be a teacher. Sister, you gonna teach all over this world.' I would sit there and think, this poor ignorant woman, didn't she know I would never speak?"

"I have taught all over the world. I have taught at the Hebema Theatre in Tel Aviv and at the Rome Opera House; I worked in Egypt for two years as a journalist. I am a Lifetime Reynolds Professor at Wake Forest University. I teach in a number of languages and in a number of disciplines. So my grandmother knew something, and I knew she was a child of God.

"She said, 'Sister, Momma's just gonna step out on the word of God.' And I could picture this six-foot-tall black lady standing up in the heavens with nothing underneath her, with moons and suns and stars swirling all around her just standing there. So I had that assurance, if I had it for myself or not."

During those mute years, the wounded child found a bearable escape in the world of Shakespeare, Edgar Allan Poe, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and others. Also during this time, she nourished her remarkable memory and honed her skills as an intense observer and listener. A unique friend of her grandmother's, Mrs. Bertha Flowers, took the wounded bird of a child under her wing and

drew her deeper into the world of literature, using the child's love of poetry and prose to release her from the limitations of her self-imposed muteness. Maya's love of literature and the richness of language would continue to open doors throughout her life.

Her southern exposure / black death did befriend—"America" from Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well

The children lived with Annie Henderson until the harsh reality of racism in Stamps, Arkansas, shocked their grandmother into sending the children away from the safe haven she had attempted to create. When he was fourteen, Bailey arrived home one afternoon forever changed because he had witnessed firsthand the hideous cruelty of racism—something so ugly that he was paralyzed with fear. Local authorities had dragged the corpse of a lynched man from a pond. The sight of the bloated man's mutilated body revealed a ghastly horror that shook the young boy to the core. He could not fathom the cause of such hatred and brutality. But Annie Henderson understood too well that while Stamps might have been a safe place for small children, it was not a safe place

for the questioning nature of young adolescence. She quickly made arrangements to send the children to live, once again, with their mother, who had moved to San Francisco.

She came home running / back to the mothering blackness—"The Mothering Blackness" from Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Diiie

In San Francisco, Maya's complicated relationship with her mother evolved into one of mutual respect. Maya came to the realization that while her mother was not prepared to be the mother of young children, she was a tower of love and strength for a young woman. Seeking her first job, Maya longed to be a conductor on the San Francisco trolley cars. She was denied an application because of her race. Vivian Baxter urged her daughter not to accept defeat: "Give it everything you've got. Can't Do is like Don't Care. Neither of them have a home." After weeks of sitting day after day in the Market Street Railway Company office, the young girl, who lied about her age, was given the job, becoming the first African American to work as a streetcar conductor. However, the job came with difficult hours. Each day, long before dawn, Vivian



Andrew Young, Maya Angelou, and Jesse Jackson

Baxter drove her daughter to work and then followed the streetcar until the sun rose, determined to protect her from any danger. As the job ended, her mother reminded her, “You learned that you have power—power and determination.” Her mother’s positive encouragement was empowering to the young woman, who began to have faith in her abilities.

When Vivian realized that that Maya had become pregnant at sixteen, she never shamed her daughter, but supported her and helped her to believe in her ability to be a good mother. Vivian Baxter remained her daughter’s champion for the remainder of her life, and Angelou honors her memory in *Mom & Me & Mom*, released in 2013.

I’m a woman / Phenomenally. / Phenomenal woman / That’s me—
“Phenomenal Woman” from *And Still I Rise*

Maya’s years as a young mother were marked with adversity. She shares those experiences with unabashed honesty in *Gather Together in My Name*, the second and most controversial in the autobiographical series. Maya desperately struggled to establish her independence and support her child in the face of overwhelming challenges. The naïve young girl was disappointed by a cast of men who used her and a society that seemingly had little to offer. Her story brought to life the ugly reality of the fast life and the desperation of poverty as if to tell others, “Look, I made mistakes, and you can learn from them

and avoid the same pitfalls." She describes the experience of those years: "The life of the underworld was truly a rat race, and most of its inhabitants scurried like rodents in the sewers and gutters of the world. I had walked the precipice and seen it all." As she walked that dangerous precipice, a man she turned to for security chose to expose her to his heroin addiction in an attempt to scare her straight. It worked. He pushed her away from the edge, and she decided to take her life in a different direction. "I had no idea what I was going to make of my life, but I had found my innocence. I swore I'd never lose it again."

Maya Angelou did not allow her experiences to define or defeat her. While many would have been overcome with despair and resentment, she took responsibility for her choices. When asked how she dealt with the injustice and anger she must have felt, she responded, "I did not become bitter. Bitterness is like a cancer; it eats upon the host. It does not do anything to the object of one's displeasure. I have never been bitter, but I can be angry at cruelty and at brutality and unkindness. Oh, yes, I am angry, and I speak out against it and work against it and encourage people not to live with it. I think anger is good. Like anything, when it goes too far, anger can be dangerous. Anger

means that you do not accept what is being offered to you, or being offered to anyone. Anger is like fire; it burns up the drought and leaves some nutrients." Those nutrients seemed to provide Maya with amazing strength. I commented about her remarkable resilience, and she responded, "Resilience is an interesting word. It means that you have been somewhere and going somewhere else and going somewhere else, which is what we are all doing." But we don't all move forward with the zeal, intensity, and courage with which she still approaches life. Words are things, and Maya Angelou's words have been *the* things that have helped to change society. Her success has been empowering, but I sense that with Maya, it is also humbling. When asked about humility, with wisdom she replied, "It comes from inside out, not outside in. It says there was someone before me. I am loved, and I have a responsibility to prepare myself so that I can love someone else. I am grateful that I have come through and have encouraged others to come through. I am grateful for that."

I have a certain way of being in this world / and I shall not, I shall not be moved—"On Grandmothers" from I Shall Not Be Moved

Ernest Holmes teaches, "The mystics of every age have seen, sensed, and taught the same truth! The great poets have been true mystics who, through their poems, have revealed the Presence of God....[They] have given us poetry which is immortal, because they had a spiritual sense of life." When asked if she would agree with that statement, Maya replied, "I think it was Wordsworth who said, 'We all come from the creator trailing clouds of glory.' We are all creative. We may have it beaten out of us, or kicked out of us when we are children, or we may never have the chance to trust ourselves. But we all come from the creator trailing clouds of glory.

"Imagine a slave sold to another person who has the right to say this person cannot move within one inch from where I say he or she can move to and can live or die if I say so. And that person says"—and she broke into powerful song—"I open my mouth to the Lord, and I won't turn back, no, I shall go, I will go, I'll see what the end is gonna be." Now that's a mystic. Daring! Imagine this, imagine," she continued in her mellow, deep, resonant voice singing the lines from the classic Underground Railroad spiritual, "'Go down Moses, way down in Egypt land....' Imagine being sold by somebody and singing that. That's a mystic."

I want to thank You, Lord / for life and all that's in it—"Thank You, Lord" from And Still I Rise

In addition to Maya's grandmother and mother, other loving, wise teachers provided sparks of light that acted as guideposts and helped to illuminate the way. Gospel, calypso, blues, jazz—the love of music gave richness to her life. Music also opened doors of opportunity. As a young mother, Maya frequented a record store, a bright spot amidst challenging conditions. The young woman's self-taught knowledge of jazz was noticed by the store's owner, who offered her employment and kindness that developed into a genuine friendship, her first friendship with a white adult. The store owner's name was Louise Cox, and she was a Christian Scientist. She shared Christian Science literature with Maya, who at this point was questioning the concept of a wrathful and unforgiving God. New ideas helped Maya expand her understanding of the presence of God, an understanding that still serves her. "I know that God is all there is; there is no space where God is not." I know that. There are certain things I know, and they allow me to continue to be as creative, and as kind, and as courageous as I can be at that



Dr. Maya Angelou and President Clinton

moment. That's one of them. Another is 'In God I live and move and have my being.' I draw on that all the time when I am most hurt and it feels I have not been treated well, or when I feel my body is not responding the way I wish it would. I draw upon that, and it serves me very well."

Later, another friend, her voice teacher Mr. Frederick Wilkerson, introduced Maya to the New Thought philosophy through the teachings of Unity. Under his guidance, she joined a group and studied *Lessons in Truth* by Emilie Cady. She recalled a time when Wilkie, as she called him, had her read aloud a section ending with the words, "God loves me." She remembered that about the seventh repetition, she was struck with the "gravity and grandeur of it all." The deep understanding

of those words moved her. She explained, "It still does. It does! At this moment, I am exalted; I am taller than the tallest trees. That entity that created leaves and flies and rivers and stars loves me...." The depth and sincerity of her emotion seemed to stop time and quicken the heart, it was so powerful, and then she continued, "I know that I am a child of God, and I cannot be treated any which way. I am precious, and I believe that everyone else is precious. There were gospel songs that meant the world to me when I was a child. I sang that with great fervor and great appreciation, but in later years I *knew* it. It wasn't just a song that I sang."

Once, when she was overcome with anxiety at the challenge of raising a son to be happy and

responsible and liberated in racist society, she found herself in such despair that she contemplated suicide. She turned to Wilkie, and he told her, "Sit down right here at this table and write down your blessings. Think of the millions of people all over the world who cannot hear a choir, a symphony, or their own babies crying. Write down, 'I can hear—Thank God.'" She remembered, "I followed Wilkie's orders, and when I reached the last line on the first page of the yellow pad, the agent of madness was routed." She has continued to follow this practice. "The challenging days of my existence may or may not be bright and promising. I maintain an attitude of gratitude. If I insist on being pessimistic, there is always tomorrow. Today, I am blessed."

Her teachers have had a lasting impact: "These roads to God, along with the roads I already knew, have helped to make me secure." At eighty-five, she continues to study and deepen her spiritual path, always a learner and a seeker. "That which I am learning now helps me to understand more profoundly that which I have been studying all of my life."

*Lift up your eyes upon / this day
breaking for you. / Give birth again
/ to the dream— "On the Pulse of
Morning"*

Maya Angelou's chronicle continues to capture the best and the worst of the American experience. Her story inspires generations to live with optimism and commitment. Friendship, courage, faith, generosity, and love are the themes that form the fiber of her invincible life and the vast body of her work. Through her eyes, readers experience the challenge of being a good mother and pursuing a career as an artist. From her perspective, we see Watts burning. With her, we walk the civil rights journey and more fully understand the power, pride, and promise of better days. Through her tears, we feel the heartbreak and despair as she shares her sorrow upon learning of the death of her friends and mentors Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King. Maya Angelou continues to bear powerful witness to the painful struggle and exhilarating birth of a new evolution of consciousness.

In 1993, she was asked to read her poem "On the Pulse of Morning" at the inauguration of President Bill Clinton. Her stories and poems have succeeded in breaking open the heart of humanity and planting seeds of understanding and love. I asked her if she sees her body of work in that role. She responded,



Maya Angelou reading
"On the Pulse of Morning"

in her honest and characteristic humility, "I think it is in that role, and it will be used as it is useful. I hope that it will be useful for the next few hundred years. I hope it is useful for a middle-aged white woman in Des Moines, Iowa, and a young Chinese boy in Calhoun [Georgia], and an old black man in Mississippi. I hope it will be of use to everybody. If it is there, it will be of use, I pray. I have done my best to make it useful. I have a feeling that we have already been paid for and all we really have to do—journalists, ditch diggers, ballet dancers—is prepare ourselves and pay for someone else who is yet to come."

Does she believe that we are evolving forward? Her enthusiastic response: "Yes I do! Evolution is a slow dance. We have to have some nerve, some trust to dare to grow—to leave

the old beliefs behind and try on something that might not seem like it is going to fit. We have another chance. We have more and more chances and more and more time. Let's pray mightily."

*When we come to it
We, this people, on this
wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this
earth
Have the power to fashion for
this earth
A climate where every man and
every woman
Can live freely without
sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear*

*When we come to it
We must confess that we are the
possible
We are the miraculous, the true
wonder of this world
That is when, and only when
We come to it.*

From "A Brave and Startling Truth." Written for and read at the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations in 1995.

Maya Angelou was honored by the United Nations as one of the elders of the community of literary greats in October 2011. ■