



Commentary: Poetry Is the Human Heart Speaking in Its Own Melody

Dr. Maya Angelou

ABSTRACT

In this interview Dr. Maya Angelou shares some early pivotal events and the important role her grandmother and brother played in supporting her spirit and encouraging her potential. She speaks of her strong conviction that poetry is essential, not only for students but also for everyone. She believes that reading poetry, which she feels should be read aloud, helps us to understand that we are not alone and that others have experienced and survived similar situations. The students in her poetry class bring what they learn to their respective disciplines because they come “to realize that nothing human should be alien to [them].”

As a world-renowned poet, author, performer, film producer, and social justice advocate, I know readers of LEARNing Landscapes would be interested in knowing what pivotal events in your early life contributed to your work as a poet and writer?

Well, I'd rather say the pivotal events which took place in my life made me who I am, and that I turned out to be a writer was secondary. That is to say my mother and father separated when I was three and my brother, five, and they put us on a train with tags around our arms without adult supervision and sent us from Los Angeles, California to a little village in Arkansas, to my paternal grandmother. We were torn, of course, as small children alone and in a wild world, but my grandmother was so soothing. She was a very tall black lady who wore long clothes, having dresses down to her shoes and she spoke very softly. She had a huge

voice but at home she spoke so softly that I remember people saying, “Speak up, Sister Henderson” (*laughter*). And whenever I find myself in stress and I speak softly, my grandson used to say, “Turn up the volume, grandma.” Knowing her and being in that ambience of love and calmness, serenity, had a serious impact on me. Why, I think that I and my brother stopped missing our mother and father but we had something so steadying—there was that—and then at seven, I was picked up from my grandmother and taken to St. Louis to my mother’s people, and I’m sorry to say her boyfriend raped me. I told the name of the rapist to my brother, who told it to the family. The man was put in jail for one day and night and was released. And then the police came to my mother’s mother’s house and told her in my earshot that the man had been found dead and it seemed he was kicked to death. My seven-year logic told me that my speech, my talking, my telling his name, had killed him—and so I stopped speaking for almost seven years. I thought my breath could kill anybody, go through the keyhole and out into the air and kill somebody. So, save for my brother, I stopped speaking. My mother’s family, they did their best to talk and get me to talk, to woo me away from my mutism, but they didn’t know what my voice could do. So, they sent me and my brother back to my grandmother in Arkansas. And my grandmother told me that she didn’t care that people said I probably was an idiot or a moron because that I didn’t talk. My grandmother told me, “I know when you and the Good Lord get ready, you’re going to be a teacher, sister, you’re going to teach all over this world.” I used to think, this poor ignorant woman, doesn’t she know I will never speak? I have taught in Italy, in Egypt, in England, all over the United States, and in West Africa. My work is used in South Africa and President Mandela said that during his imprisonment some people would smuggle my books into Robben Island, into the prison, and he would read them and be uplifted. So that grandmother, and her belief in me, formed me, you see what I mean ... This is why I can’t say that that made me a writer but all those things, all those events, directed me into writing, because I didn’t talk, I listened—I *listened*. I sometimes would think of my whole body as an ear, and I could go into a room and absorb all sounds. I think because I listened, learned to listen, that helped me. That has helped me to learn many, many languages and to speak a few, and even teach in a few. So books, words ... words meant the earth to me, and still do. I love them—they helped me to define myself to myself and helped me to define my world.

Can you tell us about the first poems that you wrote and how that came about?

I wrote first because I fell in love with poetry. I liked it so much, and I thought, well (I was about nine), I can write some of that (*laughter*). I probably wrote the silliest conglomeration of words west or east of the Rockies, but in any case there’s some

evidence in the rare books room at my university of my work writing when I was nine. I memorized Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, the great African-American poets, and I memorized Shakespeare, some of Shakespeare, especially the sonnets. I memorized Edgar Allan Poe and Langston Hughes of course, and the poetry in the African-American spirituals, in the old Negro spirituals. I knew that that was poetry ... and I loved it. What I wrote I don't remember ... my first essay into that wonderful, mysterious world. But I did continue to write and my brother, who was two years older than I about, and who was the closest my family ever came to making a genius, my brother told me when I was maybe about ten or eleven (he was so intelligent), he told me that I shouldn't worry about people calling me "dummy, dummy, dummy" as kids would do on the way home from school or around. He said, "Don't worry, you're smarter than all of them; you're smarter than almost everybody, except me—you're not as smart as I am, of course (*laughter*)." And he was right! He also told me, and I don't know how he found this (he must have been twelve): "All knowledge, expendable currency depending upon the market ..." He used to go around proclaiming, I guess he'd read them and he'd like them and he'd memorize them, and then he'd tell me these great ponderous declarations and I believed anything he said. I believed him, for one, he couldn't lie to me: he loved me so much. He was so arrogant about knowing everything, so he wouldn't lie, so I believed that to be so. I read everything there was to read.

Poetry is not always included in the school curriculum as often as it should be. What are your thoughts about poetry and education?

I think every child, every young person, should be weaned on poetry. Each person, especially growing up when you're so insecure, each person needs to know someone was there before you, someone was lonely before you, someone was confused before you, someone was maybe brutalized before you, and miraculously someone has survived. So then that's possible for you to survive. I teach a class called, "World Poetry and Dramatic Performance" and I meet my students and we read the French poets and the Hindu poets and the African-American poets, women's poetry, men's poetry, we read Asian, we read Spanish-speaking poetry. We read everybody and then I take my students from the universities, I always insist on having one or two freshmen and/or sophomores, the rest are upper-class people, seniors or graduate students, and they are in all the disciplines from medicine and hard sciences to English to drama, and so forth. Many of them have never been on the stage, spoken, but I give black students Robert Burns to recite, and white students the Southern black poetry to recite, and men women's poetry to recite and women men's poetry, to

realize that nothing human should be alien to you. If they can ingest that idea and then go out and proclaim it on the stage, open to the town and the gown, then they go into their science classes with a new view of the subject: "Oh, I see human beings did this. Oh, I see since I am doing math and algebra and statistics, I see, these were done by human beings just like me. I see." I think that the poetry allows young people to see they're not alone and also to find that they can take inspiration, and even aspiration, from human beings who happen to be dead, and some who happen to live in China, some who live in Mississippi, some who live in Montreal.

What suggestions can you give to aspiring poets?

I really encourage all poets—and that may be everybody (*laughter*)—to read poetry and read it aloud. Go into your bedroom or into your den or your study, in your kitchen, and read poetry that you like, *loud*. Hear how the language sings. It's almost impossible—if possible at all—to translate poetry, yet it's imperative that we try to. We have to try to translate it. Every language has its melody, and so poetry is the human heart speaking in its own melody, in its own language. I have a book called, "Still I Rise," which really means to say after all that has happened to me, I rise. And when it was first completed in French the title was "La tête haute" (*laughter*)—it had nothing to do with pride. But it's still better to try to read and write poetry and read it aloud, whatever you like, so you can hear the music in the poetry.



Dr. Maya Angelou is one of the most renowned and influential voices of our time. Hailed as a global renaissance woman, Dr. Angelou is a celebrated poet, memoirist, novelist, educator, dramatist, producer, actress, historian, filmmaker, and civil rights activist.

Born on April 4th, 1928, in St. Louis, Missouri, Dr. Angelou was raised in St. Louis and Stamps, Arkansas. In Stamps, Dr. Angelou experienced the brutality of racial discrimination, but she also absorbed the unshakable faith and values of traditional African-American family, community, and culture.

Dr. Angelou has served on two presidential committees, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Arts in 2000, the Lincoln Medal in 2008, and has received 3 Grammy Awards. President Clinton requested that she compose a poem to read at his inauguration in 1993.

Dr. Angelou's reading of her poem "On the Pulse of the Morning" was broadcast live around the world.

Dr. Angelou has received over 30 honorary degrees and is Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University.

Dr. Angelou's words and actions continue to stir our souls, energize our bodies, liberate our minds, and heal our hearts.