



Maya Angelou

Biography Timeline: **April 4, 1928**, born Marguerite Ann Johnson, one of two children to Bailey Johnson and Vivian Baxter Johnson, in St. Louis, Missouri; older brother, Bailey, Jr., gives her name of “Maya”; **1931**, parents marriage ends in Long Beach, California, and she and brother are sent to live with paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, whom she comes to call “Momma,” in Stamps, Arkansas; **1935**, returns to St. Louis to live with mother; **1937**, raped by mother’s boyfriend; after attacker’s sudden and violent death, does not speak for five years; returns to Arkansas to live with grandmother; develops extraordinary memory and appreciation of literature; is influenced by teacher, Bertha Flowers, to expand her world through reading and to begin to speak; **1941**; moves with brother to San Francisco to live with mother; attends George Washington High School; studies dance and drama at California Labor School; **1942**, becomes first African-American cable car conductor; **1943**, graduates from high school; gives birth to son, Clyde Johnson (later changed to Guy Johnson); works as waitress and cook; **1948**, has a realization of her death and the impossibility of thwarting it, experiences great release ; **1951**, marries Enistastius (Tosh) Angelos, Greek sailor; marriage dissolves; takes name of Angelou, begins career as night club singer; **1954**, divorces Angelos; works in San Francisco’s famed club “The Purple Onion;” appears as “Ruby” in a production of “*Porgy and Bess*” which tours Europe; studies modern dance with Martha Graham; dances with Alvin Ailey on television variety shows; meets James Baldwin in Paris; **1957**, records first album, “*Clypso Lady*”; **1958**, moves to New York; joins Harlem Writers Guild; sings at clubs, including Apollo Theater in Harlem; **1959**, becomes involved in civil rights movement; produces Off-Broadway play, “*Cabaret for Freedom*,” as a fund-raiser for Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); **1960**, meets and marries Vusumzi Make, South African civil rights activist; moves to Cairo, Egypt; edits *The Arab Observer*; **1961**, teaches at University of Ghana’s School of Music and Drama ; serves as feature editor, *The Africa Review*; meets Malcom X; **1964**, returns to U.S. to assist Malcom X in Organization of African-American Unity; **February 21, 1965**, Malcom X assassinated; Martin Luther King appoints her coordinator of the northern branch of SCLC; **April 4, 1968**, Martin Luther King, Jr. assassinated; ; **1969**, publishes *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, first of seven autobiographical volumes; **1971**, publishes first book of poetry, *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ‘fore I Diie*; **1972**, writes movie script for “*Georgia, Georgia*,” first script by an African American woman ever made into a movie; **1977**, performs in television mini-series “*Roots*” and is nominated for an Emmy; marries Paul du Feu; moves to Sonoma, California; joins Glide Memorial Church (Methodist) in San Francisco; **1980**, divorces Paul Du Feu; **1981**, becomes Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University, North Carolina; becomes member of Mount Zion Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, N.C; **1984**, meets Oprah Winfrey, becomes her friend and mentor; **January 20, 1993**, delivers, “*On The Pulse of Morning*,” inaugural poem, at President Clinton’s inauguration; **1995**, delivers “*A Brave and Startling Truth*,” a poem commemorating 50th anniversary of the United Nations; **2000**, receives National Medal of Arts; **January 2002**, Hallmark debuts “*Maya Angelou Life Mosaic Collection*” line of products; **2011**, receives Presidential Medal of Freedom; **2013**, publishes *Mom & Me & Mom*; **May 28, 2014**, dies at home, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; **May 29, 2014**, public memorial service held at Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Winston-Salem; **June 7, 2014**, private memorial service held at Wait Chapel, Wake Forest University, Winton-Salem, with speeches by her son Guy Johnson, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Clinton and Michelle Obama; **June 15, 2014**, memorial service held at Glide Memorial Church, San Francisco, California.

Throughout all of her adult life, Maya Angelou was a “renaissance woman.” It is hard to imagine any other woman in North America during her lifetime who was more qualified for that moniker. Singer, dancer, actor, playwright, screenwriter, composer, director, journalist, scholar, activist, philanthropist, memoirist, poet, essayist – these are all titles for

what Angelou did professionally with her time on earth. But they cannot begin to describe who she was and what she came to mean to millions.

Angelou was an extraordinary combination of boldness and humility, sass and sophistication, deep reverence and quick-witted irreverence. She was intimately acquainted with the canon of the Harlem Renaissance and the intricacies of politics, the beauty of Shakespeare and the wonders of fried chicken, the depths of sorrow and the necessity of celebration.

The list of Angelou's accomplishments, the itinerary of her travels, the scope of adulation by her admirers, and the reach of her fame would lead some observers to conclude that she was a composite of several people and not merely one person. And yet she still conveyed an unassuming, comforting common touch. "In all the days of my life, I never met a woman who was more completely herself than Maya Angelou."(1)

It was in her writing, however – principally poetry and creatively rendered memoirs – that Angelou left her most profound mark. Liberated from trauma-induced muteness as a child, she became one of the most popular writers and most sought after speakers in America. Author of 13 volumes of poetry, 8 autobiographical books, 6 books of essays, 8 plays, 2 cinematic screenplays, 2 scripts for television, and 9 children's books, she continued to write and publish in her ninth decade of life.

While not all of Angelou's writing has been adjudged as accomplished literature(2), her ways with words have been affectionately regarded by millions of appreciative readers as suffused with abiding, inspirational power.

Certain themes populate the "worlds" Angelou inhabited in and through her books.

Universality

In Angelou's thinking, there is a universality and a commonality among all people. All we have to do is pay closer attention and we will discover how close the family of humanity truly is and can eventually become. In one of her most quoted poems, "*Human Family*," she repeats the poem's refrain in triplicate: "We are more alike my friends than we are unlike." (3) This is not only a poetic choice forming the poem's overall force, it is also one of Angelou's premier convictions.

Community

To be a human being, fully developing before God, and empowered by the wonderful gifts that are ours, we abide in community. Anything less leaves us dwarfed, shunted, stifled, despairing. In her poem "*Alone*," Angelou declares that fully functioning personhood disallows a life based solely on solo acts.

*Lying, thinking
Last night
How to find my soul a home
Where water is not thirsty
And breadloaf is not stone
I came up with one thing
And I don't believe I'm wrong
That nobody,
But nobody
Can make it out here alone.*(4)

The Call to Elegance

In and through the arts – dancing, acting upon the stage, posing before the camera, writing upon the page, directing a movie – Angelou discovered a foundational truth that was validated by her own existential triumphs: We are called to experience and express the joyful, ecstatic, elegant realities of human experience. Angelou would have no one settle for what e.e. cummings described as "human merely being." Ultimately, life is a celebration:

“Surviving is nice, but thriving,... Ah! That is elegant.”(5)

Religious Faith is a Developmental Art

For Angelou, our faith journeys are never done. We are all of us works in progress. In essays, public lectures, poetry readings, and television interviews, Angelou displays deep humility about her own religious path. “I’m startled or taken aback when people walk up to me and tell me they are Christians. My first response is the question ‘Already?’ It seems to me a lifelong endeavor to try to live the life of a Christian.... The idyllic condition cannot be arrive at and held on to eternally. It is in the search itself that one finds the ecstasy.” (6)

Prayer’s Efficacy

While she may have experienced verbal muteness at a significant juncture in her childhood, it does not appear that Maya Angelou ever lost her capacity to pray. In several of her poems – in poems like *“Thank You, Lord”* and *“Calling on God, Just Like Job”* – she evidences prayer-like intentions and focuses on obviously religious subjects. On occasion she will even address deity with phrases like “...Visit us again. Savior./....We cry for you/ although we have lost/your name.”(7) As an octogenarian she continued to believe in prayer’s efficacy in simple and profound ways: “I know that when I pray something wonderful happens, not only for the person that I am praying for, but also for me. I am being heard.”(8)

Praying with Maya Angelou - Suggestions for Use

Day 1 **More Alike Than We Are Unalike** – Pray today by first considering how each person you meet during the next 24 hours will be like you in some significant way. Pray for a sensitive heart and an open mind in your interactions with everyone you encounter today. Pray also for ever-increasing compassion toward the human family.

Day 2 **Never Alone** – Pray a prayer of thanksgiving today that you are not alone in the

living of your life. Name the specific persons from the past and the present who have made your life possible. Say a blessing after each utterance of their names.

- Day 3 **Surviving and Thriving** – Pray today by considering those portions of your life in which you are merely “surviving.” Pray for insight and a keened awareness of how you might move from “surviving” to “thriving.” Pray for the resolve and strength to make that movement become a reality.
- Day 4 **Can You Imagine** – Fifty years after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Delivered his historic *“I Have A Dream”* oration during the March on Washington, Maya Angelou wondered, *“Can you imagine if we did not have this undergirded hate and racism, prejudice, sexism and ageism? If we were not crippled by these idiocies, can you imagine what our country would be like?”* (9) Begin to imagine what your country would be like, what the world would be like, if we abandoned all “idiocies” which crippled the human community. Pray for the courage to call out such idiocies when you witness them and the wisdom to live according to an alternative vision of hopefulness.
- Day 5 **At Home with God** – Angelou has been a member of both Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco and Mount Zion Baptist Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. She has said “There is no place greater than the home of God, except in our individual selves, than the places where women and men set aside to go and worship, to just come together, and praise of the spirit of God.”(10) Pray today by giving thanks for the place(s) where you worship, gather with other believers and offer praise to God. Pray as well that there might be an increase in the number of people seeking such “homes of God.”
- Day 6 **Efficacy and Expectation** – Pray today by repeating the phrase from Angelou's poem *“Savior”*: “Visit us again. Savior.” Pray with a confidence in your praying simply because you are “being heard.” Pray with the expectation that God will not only hear you but will respond.
- Day 7 **On the Pulse of a New Day** – In 1993, Angelou offered what is arguably her greatest poem, *“On the Pulse of Morning,”* on the occasion of the first inauguration of President William Jefferson Clinton. (She was the first poet chosen for such a task since Robert Frost had offered a poem at President Kennedy's inauguration.) Pray today, first by repeating three times the poem's closing stanza: “Here, on the pulse of this new day,/You may have the grace to look up and out/And into your sister's eyes, and into/Your brother's face, your country/And say simply/Very simply/With hope-Good morning.”(11) Now pray for the grace, vision, and hope to say “Good morning” to the arrival of this day and all of life that is unfolding before you in the future.

NOTES

- (1) Oprah Winfrey, as part of her "Introduction" in Marcia Ann Gillespie, Rosa Johnson Butler, Richard A. Long, *Maya Angelou: A Glorious Celebration* (New York: Doubleday, 2008)
- (2) See Hilton Als, "SONGBIRD: Maya Angelou takes another look at herself," *The New Yorker*, August 5, 2002, and Harold Bloom's "Introduction" in *Maya Angelou: Blooms Major's Poets* (Broomall, Pennsylvania: Chelsea House Publishers, 2001).
- (3) Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 225.
- (4) *Ibid.*, p. 74
- (5) Angelou made this statement during her presentations, along with Frederick Buechner and James Carroll, at the Trinity Institute's "God With Us" conference, January 25-27, 1990, Grace Episcopal Cathedral, San Francisco, California, which was attended by author.
- (6) Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now* (New York: Random House, 1993), p. 73; see also Episcopal News Service's February 8, 1990 account of "God With Us Conference at http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/ENS/ENSpress_release.pl?pr_number=90042.
- (7) "Savior," in *The Complete Collected Poems*, p. 252.
- (8) Facebook, May 20, 2013 - <https://www.facebook.com/MayaAngelou/posts/10151691707054796>
- (9) Maya Angelou, "THERE IS STILL HOPE," "What The Dream Means to Me," *Time*, August 26-September 12, 2013, p. 99.
- (10) Susan King, "MAYA ANGELOU: Of Religion and Rainbows," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1992.
- (11) Maya Angelou, *The Inaugural Poem: On the Pulse of Morning* (New York: Random House, 1993)

FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, & REFLECTION

Maya Angelou, *Celebrations: Rituals of Peace and Prayer* (New York: Random House, 2006)
Maya Angelou, *The Complete Collected Poems* (New York: Random House, 1994)
Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York: Random House, 1969)
Maya Angelou, *Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now* (New York: Random House, 1993)
Marcia Ann Gillespie, Rosa Johnson Butler, Richard A. Long *Maya Angelou: A Glorious Celebration* (New York: Doubleday, 2008)
Susan King, "MAYA ANGELOU: Of Religion and Rainbows," *The Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1992 -
Bob Minzesheimer, "Maya Angelou celebrates her 80 years of pain and joy," *USA Today*, March 26, 2008.