



Maya Angelou

Maya Angelou The Role of Art in Life

(Maya Angelou, a woman of many talents, is an accomplished singer, dancer, playwright, song writer, historian and educator. She has also worked extensively in television and film. In 1977, she received the Golden Eagle Award for her PBS documentary, "Afro-American in the Arts.")

... Many years ago, I grew up in a small town in Arkansas and, at seven years old, I had a traumatic experience which caused me to become a mute. I was a volunteer mute from seven-and-a-half until twelve-and-a-half, and here is evidence of the importance of art in life. There was a woman in my town, a black lady, who took pity on me as a mute. She came to my grandmother's store and would collect me, take me to her house and read to me. She was a marvelous looking woman—very, very black, that color we call "plum blue." But beautiful color; so lovely it seemed that if her fingernails came across it, it would peel. She wore voile. (For young people, that's a kind of cotton chiffon that simply moved like this . . . in the wind.) Mrs. Flowers would come up the dirt road looking like a black angel, with that flowing look. She'd stop by the store and say, "Marguerite, you may come with me and I will give you tea, cookies and lemonade, and I will read to you from Charles Dickens."

She had this great voice, so she would sound like this: *It was the best of times, it was the*

worst of times. I was just captured by it. She then took me to the little school, one building (for all the grades) and started me to read. She told me I had to read from A to maybe C, and she would come back in maybe three or four months. (She had her country house, if you will, in Stamps, Arkansas.) She'd say, "Now, when I come back, I want you to have read from A to C." So, I would read. I read everything in the black high school, and then she had some connection in the white school. She'd come up that dirt road carrying books from the white school, so I read everything . . . I didn't understand a lot, but I read it. . . .

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She knew I loved poetry. I had James Weldon Johnson, County Cullen, Langston Hughes and Paul Lawrence Dunbar at the tip of my tongue. I loved Shakespeare—I didn't understand that much, but I loved it. I would record whole scenes and plays, and all the sonnets I could just choke down. I loved Edgar Allan Poe. I loved him so much, I called him EAP to myself. So, one day when I was 12, she told me I could never love poetry—until I spoke it. It was so horrible, because it seemed to me she was taking from me my one friend. So I ran out of her house, I refused to speak to her. (Since I didn't speak, I refused to go

(Editor's Note: The comments on the following pages are excerpted from keynote speeches presented at NALAA's seventh annual convention.)

to her at all.) She would come down to the store and tell my grandmother, who was semi-literate, "It's a shame about Marguerite. It's a shame that she will never love poetry until she speaks it over her tongue, under her palate, through her teeth and across her lips."

Finally, at twelve-and-a-half, I went under the house and tried to speak poetry. I found out I did, indeed, have a voice. It was so important to me that it gave me a sense, always, of what it was to be an artist. As a young person I knew then that being an artist meant taking responsibility for the time one takes up and the space one occupies. That is being an artist. And that doesn't mean one has to write down poetry or compose the piece of music or paint the important painting which lifts the soul of the human being or dance that dance or design that building. It means really being an artist in the heart. It is interesting that you invite me to speak in the heartland of the land of the heart. And to see how this worked for me.

When small black children in my little town in Arkansas and in my Baptist church in North Carolina were asked, and still are asked, to perform in church, the phrase is very endearing which describes what they do: "Little Mistress Phillamina will now render a rendition." And it's always the same poem. It's done at Christmas and Easter, and the child rehearses like a fiend, then gets up and says (gasping) "Whatcha lookin' at me for?" (Gasping) "I didn't come to stay!" (Gasping) "It's—" And some kind old person in the church will say "Christmas, honey." And then the child will say, "Christmas day." And then he or she gets off the platform, and all the old people say, "Didn't she do nicely? Bless her heart, bless that child! Mmm!"

During the period when I was a mute, I would watch those kids, and it was just terrible because I knew so much, I had it, but I couldn't speak. And then some of the older people in the town were really very cruel. It is said loosely, and I believe inaccurately, that children are cruel. I don't believe so, because they don't know the extent of their action; they don't know what it really costs the object of their disapprobation. So it's not really cruelty. But older people can be cruel. And, because my grandmother owned a lot of land, and was the woman of the town, older people who were angry with my grandmother—they used to pass me, they wouldn't say it in front of her—they'd pass me and say, "Mm-mm, it's a shame Sister Henderson's California granddaughter done gone mental." Or, "mm-mm, it's a shame Sister Henderson's granddaughter, you know. . . ."

So, I wanted revenge, but I could never get it. But at twelve-and-a-half, I had my voice back, and I decided I would render a rendition. In the CME Church in Stamps, Arkansas, I decided that I would render Portia's speech from *The Merchant of Venice*. That

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would get them. That would knock them right off their pews—I could see myself doing it: “The quality of mercy” (pause) “is not strained. It droppeth” (long pause) “As a gentle rain—I had it choreographed; it was going to be fantastic. But then, mama asked me, “Sister, what are you planning to render?” So I told her, “A piece from Shakespeare, Mama.” Mama asked, “Now sister, who is this very Shakespeare?” I had to tell her that Shakespeare was white. And Mama felt the less we said about whites, the better, and if we didn’t mention them at all, maybe they’d just get up and leave. I couldn’t lie to her, so I told her, “Mama, it’s a piece written by William Shakespeare who is white, but he’s dead. And has been dead for centuries.” Now, I thought then she would forgive him that little indiosyncrasy. Mama said, “Sister, you will render a piece of Mister Langston Hughes, Mister County Cullen, Mister James Weldon Johnson, or Mister Paul Lawrence Dunbar. Yes ma’am, little mistress, you will.”

“Of course he wrote it for me; that is a condition of the black woman. Of course, he was a black woman. I understand that. Nobody else understands it, but I know that William Shakespeare was a black woman.”

Well, I did. But years later, when I physically and psychologically left that country, that condition, which is Stamps, Arkansas, a condition I warrant, regrettably, that a number of people in this very room abide today, I found myself, and still find myself, whenever I like stepping back into Shakespeare. Whenever I like, I pull him to me. He wrote it for me. “*When in disgrace with fortune in men’s eyes/ I all alone beweeep my outcast state/ and trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries/ and look upon myself and curse my fate/ wishing me like to one more rich in hope/ featured like him, like him with friends possessed/ desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope/ with what I most enjoy contented least. . . .*” Of course he wrote it for me; that is a condition of the black woman. Of course, he was a black woman. I understand that. Nobody else understands it, but I know that William Shakespeare was a black woman.

That is the role of art in life—I found it, and I find it always important, to reach to Carlos Fuentes, who, as my grandmother says, “Puts some starch in my backbone.” Whenever I need, I reach for Edna St. Vincent Millay, knowing that she was a white

woman, well thought of, well regarded, well enough off, and about to become a recluse in New York when she wrote: “*I shall die, but that is all I will do for Death/ I hear his horse’s hooves on the stones/ He has business this morning—business in Cuba, business in the Balkans/ But he must mount by himself, I will not give him a leg up/ I am not in his employ/ I shall die, but that is all I will do for death/ I will not tell him where the black boy lies hidden in the swamp/ Brothers and sisters the keys to the city are safe with me/ Through me you will never be overthrown/ for I shall die, but that is all I will do for death.*” [sic] I know, I know she wrote it for me, because I use it. It becomes starch in my backbone so many times. I will use Kōbō Abe when I choose. I will use Li Po whenever I like. Saint-Exupery whenever I like. I understand that they wrote it for me. Gorky wrote for me. It is important. Art then becomes not only a way of life, but it becomes life itself. It allows one to breathe deeply. It allows one to stop hyperventilating. It really does. That is the role of art in life. . . .



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with local arts agencies would significantly enhance local public support for the arts. We’re very proud of the program’s record to date, and if our evaluation verifies these early impressions, it seems likely that the case will have been made for a permanent Endowment/ Locals partnership.

But the Endowment’s efforts on behalf of local arts agencies, including arts activities in small towns and rural areas, go beyond the Locals Test Program. I’ve been using my office as a “bully pulpit” to advocate more local support for the arts. Through a cooperative agreement with the Department of Agriculture, the Endowment’s Design Arts Program has helped to expand the Main Street Project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation—which we helped to initiate eight years ago—to reach 465 towns with populations of 50,000 or less through an unprecedented telecommunications conference. Many of these smaller towns are now benefiting from service provided by the Main Street Center in Washington to enhance the design—as well as the organization, management, and marketing—of their “main streets,” and we hope that an increased arts presence will often be included.

The importance of local arts support is reaffirmed by a study recently conducted for the Endowment by Mark Schuster of M.I.T., comparing arts support in the United States, Canada, and six European countries. The study shows that direct public support for the arts tends to be highest in those countries where local and regional support and decision making are most substantial. It makes clear

the vital importance of state and local arts support in supplementing the basic American reliance upon tax-deductible private contributions in sustaining nonprofit arts activity—a system of partnership which compares favorably with the very different systems used by most of the other countries included in the study . . .

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I would conclude by saying that we really do firmly believe at the Endowment that local arts agencies are a very vital piece of how the arts can be encouraged and enhanced, and reach more audiences of more different kinds in a community. I think that a very important aspect of the local arts agency’s function, because it is uniquely situated to do that, is to bring all the different people in the community together to talk about where they want to be 20 years from now in terms of arts support, in terms of what kinds of things they want to bring in the form of presenting and touring, and what kinds of things they want done either through the media or in the schools. I think that this aspect of bringing the various parts of the community together is a very important aspect of what you do.

We at the Endowment remain committed to providing, within the constraints of our budget, our fair share of assistance to NALAA’s member agencies that are prepared to take the bold steps needed to make it happen across America. Congratulations for what you do, and thank you very much.



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