

Maya Angelou

By Bridgett Flynn, Narragansett

I believe art to be one of the foundations of human understanding—an essential way to communicate what cannot be understood through simple means. It offers the ability to explain the inexplicable, to find whatever it is that complicates the human condition and give it definition. Everyone, at some point or other attempts this, but there are some who use their ability to create extraordinary change. Maya Angelou is the archetype of such people.

She is a woman not easily defined, dedicating herself to many crafts as a poet, actress, dancer, singer, playwright, author, and activist. But if allowed only one word, she is above all, an artist. During her life, Maya devoted herself as a civil and women's rights activist, working alongside Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. She is most well known for her poetry and autobiographical works, including seven autobiographies documenting the chapters of her life.

Her pieces were honored in numerous ways, including by former President Clinton and President Obama, along with innumerable honors awarded for her achievements. However, Maya spent part of her life in fear of her voice, terrified of the power of her words. At seven years old, she was raped by her mother's boyfriend. After telling her brother of the assault, her rapist was jailed and promptly released. Days after, he was found dead on the streets, thought to have been kicked to death by Maya's uncles.

After learning of his death, she stopped speaking entirely. Maya remembers how she felt during this period, in an interview she recalls, "My voice killed that man... My voice was so evil that if I put it out, it could kill anybody."

Despite the difficulties of her upbringing, after five years, Maya spoke again, this time her voice stronger, along with her growing infatuation with literature. She began reading the greats—William Shakespeare and Edgar Allen Poe among others—and soon began writing herself. Her life was characterized by harsh circumstances and a remarkable courage which allowed her to brave it all.

Her work not only progressed the civil rights movement, but inspired countless women, especially black creatives. She became one of the first to represent black women in various art forms. Maya once said, "There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you."

Through her works, she told the story of the black experience and what she believed to be the human condition. Her writing offered hope to the hopeless, and power to those oppressed. She not only bridged the gap between literature and activism but made both accessible to the ordinary person. Maya tells in one interview about her hope to seem as human as she is, and for people to understand that most great leaders are simply ordinary people who took extraordinary action.

Maya's legacy is one of courage, hope, and triumph. She will continue to be remembered as a strong black woman who created art powerful enough to rattle an entire generation, and likely countless thereafter.