



Art needs to ask us, “What do we think is our reason for being on this earth? What do we think is our right to abide on this planet? What is our duty to the planet? To other forms of life, with whom we are connected? To our own species?”

— Maya Angelou, 1990

MISS ROSIE

when i watch you
wrapped up like garbage
sitting, surrounded by the smell
of too old potato peels
or
when i watch you
in your old man's shoes
with the little toe cut out
sitting, waiting for your mind
like next week's grocery
i say
when i watch you
you wet brown bag of a woman
who used to be
{the best looking gal in georgia
use to be called the Georgia Rose
i stand up
through your destruction
i stand up¹

You honor me so by inviting me to speak this year in honor of Miss Nancy Hanks, who was a friend to all of us. I am sorry to say I have no direct stories of her, but

1990 Nancy Hanks Lecture on Arts and Public Policy

March 20, 1990

Departmental Auditorium

Washington, D.C.

Sponsored by the Gannett Foundation

Maya Angelou

sometimes brought to its knees by its own foibles,
manages to stand erect.

I suggest that art and art alone can be credited with our erect stance, or with our attempts, even bowed, to

stand erect. Art's primary purpose is to serve humanity. Art that does not increase our understanding of this particular journey or our ability to withstand this particular journey, which is life, is an exercise in futile indulgence, a demonstration of vapid foppism. I don't think art is obliged to answer the questions of conscience and morality, but art must *pose* those questions. Art needs to ask us, "What do we think is our reason for being on this earth? What do we think is our right to abide on this planet? What is our duty to the planet? To other forms of life, with whom we are connected? To our own species?"

Young men and women around the country often come to me with an alarming frequency and, without hesitation, make me privy to their most personal ambitions. They say things like, "Ms. Angelou, I saw you on national television, and I know what I want to be." "Ms. Angelou, I saw you on the Oprah show . . . I haven't read anything you wrote, but I know what I want to be." Over time, I have learned to clear my face of telling scowls and my mind of negative expectations. I simply wait. They go on, "Well, I've decided I want to be a success. I know what I want to be. I've decided I'm going to be a star."

I also have made some decisions. One was made after a few rather painful tries to explain that it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve either one of those conditions. They might achieve both or neither, but, in any case, the mere wishing will not bring those conditions into existence. I usually just stand and wait. They continue: "I mean, what I want to be, Ms. Angelou, is an artist."

Well, by the time they reach that clarification for themselves, I am obliged to look at the speaker, always with some pity, and to look more earnestly and directly at myself, to get into the privacy of my self and ask what my own aspirations and qualifications are. I wonder, does a young person really need to feel the weight of responsibility in order to be a responsible artist? Is it necessary to hold the burden of *weltzschmerz* between the folds in own's frown in order to paint or sculpt?

I don't know. But I do believe that the burden, the guilt of being chosen, the disappointment of having been left out, all of those conditions of life become the

¹ Lucille Clifton. "Miss Rosie" Copyright ©1987 by Lucille Clifton. Reprinted from *Good Woman: Poems and a Memoir 1969-80* by Lucille Clifton with the permission of BOA Editions, Ltd. 92 Park Ave., Brockport, NY 14420.

resource material from which the artist must draw in order to paint or sculpt or write or choreograph or compose or sing or act. I grew up in a state many worlds away from Washington, D.C. In fact, the Arkansas in which I grew up did not seem to be on anybody's planet or, for that matter, on anybody's mind. The relentless poverty of the Depression, allied with the virulent racial prejudices of the time, had the power to grind the spirit into submission and pulverize the very ability to dream. Yet I, as well as others, survived those lean years and those mean Arkansas roads, and I think we survived particularly because of the inheritance of the black American. That inheritance was left for us by our forebears as certainly as steel magnates left massive fortunes for their inheritors.

In Stamps, Arkansas, when parents en route to the cotton fields left small children too young to work in the care of others too old to work, they knew that the baby tenders would read Paul Laurence Dunbar to their children. So even if a father was 20 miles away, his son would know that his father cared for him because the older person would read, recite and force the younger person to learn:

*Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes,
Come to yo' pappy an' set on his knee.
What you been doin', sub—
{makin' san' pies?
Look at dat bib—you's ez du'ty ez me.
Look at dat mouf—dat's merlasses, I bet;
Come byeab, Maria, an' wipe off his han's.
Bees gwine to ketch you
{an' eat you up yit,
Bein' so stick and sweet—goodness lan's!*

*Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes,
Who's pappy's darlin'
{an' who's pappy's chile?
Who is it all de day nevah once tries
Fu' to be cross, er once loses dat smile?
Whab did you git dem teef?
{My, you's a scamp!
Whab did dat dimple come f'om
{in yo' chin?*

*Pappy do' know you—
{I b'lieves you's a tramp;
Mammy, dis byeab's
{some ol' straggler got in!*

*Let's th'ow him outen de do' in de san',
We do' want stragglers
{a-layin' 'roun' byeab;
Let's gin him 'way to de big buggab-man'
I know he's hidin' erroun' byeab
{right neab.
Buggab-man, buggab-man, come in de do',
Hyeab's a bad boy you kin have fu' to eat.
Mammy an' pappy do' want him no mo',
Swaller him down f'om his haid to his feet!*

*Dah, now, I t'ought dat you'd
{bug me up close.
Go back, ol' buggab,
{you sha'nt have dis boy.
He ain't no tramp, ner no straggler,
{of co'se;
He's pappy's pa'dner an' playmate
{an' joy.
Come to you' pallet now—go to yo' res';
Wisht you could allus know ease
{an' cleab skies;
Wisht you could stay jes' a chile
{on my breas'—
Little brown baby wif spa'klin' eyes!²*

THE STRENGTH OF THE BLACK AMERICAN

to withstand the slings and arrows and lynch mobs and malignant neglect can be traced directly to the art of literature, music, dance and philosophy which we inherited and which, despite significant attempts to eradicate them, remain in our communities today. I know that you know that the first Africans were brought to this country in 1619. I do not mean to cast aspersions on my white brothers and sisters who take such pride in having descended from Plymouth Rock pilgrims, but I would remind you that the Africans landed in 1619. That was one year before the *Mayflower* docked. We have experienced every strife the sadistic mind of man could devise.

² Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Little Brown Baby," *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 3rd ed., ed. Alexander W. Allison (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983).

We have been lynched and pinched and drowned and clowned, and beleaguered and belittled and begrudged and befuddled. And yet here we are today. Still here. Here. Upwards of 40 million, and that's an underestimate. I know there are some people who swear there are more than 40 million black people in the Baptist church. They're not even including other dark denominations or backsliders or the three and a half black atheists. How, then, have we survived?

Because we create art and use our art immediately. We have even concealed ourselves and our pain in our art. Langston Hughes says:

*Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song,
You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain
So long.*

*Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
You do not hear
My inner cry
Because my feet
Are gay with dancing
You do not know
I die.³*

In the literature, we can find every aspect of ourselves. I have spoken of the healing, the sustaining, and the supporting roles of art in the black community. But where a larger society would have us believe that we really have made no contribution of any consequence to the Western world — other than labor, of course — I have an incident which I must tell you about, which informed me of the power of my inheritance.

I was with *Porgy and Bess*. I was the first dancer, very young, blitheringly ignorant. I never called myself the first dancer. I called myself "*la premiere danseuse*" or "*la prima ballerina*." And I always tried to stand in the second position. I mean, if I was going to get a hot

dog, I would stand in the second position. I sang the role of Ruby, but I sang by heart. I had trained as a dancer, not a singer, but I had gone to church and so I learned to sing, somehow. I was no threat to the singers, of whom there were, say, 45 who had 120 degrees in music. There were so few places for black singers trained in European classics to work that the company could afford to get a person who had one degree from Curtiss and another from Juilliard just to be in the chorus.

We traveled throughout Europe and arrived in Morocco while the company sent the sets on to Spain. Now, this is a little-known truth, but since this is an audience of artists, I am sure it will soon be disseminated around the world: black opera singers, white opera singers, Native American opera singers, Spanish-speaking opera singers, Aleut opera singers, Asian . . . all opera singers are one people, much like New York taxi drivers. They're all cut from the same piece of cloth. Well, the opera singers were informed by the conductor that since the sets had been sent on to Spain, we were obliged to perform in concert. They were ready. They had their portfolios, I am sure, on microfiche, jammed up in the heels of their shoes or something. They were absolutely ready. So, I went to the conductor, still standing in the second position, and I said, "I'm sorry, I have no aria. That is not my discipline." He was Russian, with masses of Russian artistic hair, and an artistic temperament and Russian eyes that danced about, and he fell back two whole steps and clutched his hair and said, in a heavy Russian accent, "But don't you at least know one spiritual?"

I didn't say this to him, but I thought to myself, "Is grits groceries?" Do I know a spiritual? I grew up in Arkansas, in a town about the size of the exposed part of this stage. I went to church on Sunday and I don't mean . . . and then we left. Oh, no. We went to church *all day* Sunday. And then Monday evening we went to missionary meeting, and Tuesday evening usher board meeting, and Wednesday evening prayer meeting, and Thursday evening deaconess meeting, and Friday choir practice. We didn't go to church on Saturday. We just used that entire day to prepare to go to church on Sunday all day long. And at all those gatherings we sang. So of *course* I could sing a spiritual.

³ Langston Hughes, "Minstrel Man," *Four Negro Poets*, ed. Alain LeRoy Locke. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1927).

I can use spirituals, long-meter hymns; I knew some moans; I knew a whole lotta groans . . . I looked at him and said, “I will try to think of something.”

Well, the other singers went out that evening and delivered themselves beautifully of the important arias in the canon of European classical music. And they were very, very well received. I went out onto the stage, after they had finished their duets and arias and solos, and I looked into the pit. There was a 120-piece orchestra in the pit, but how could they help me with their violas and celli? I said, “Lay out, it’s all right.”

I thought of a song my grandmother sang in that little town in Arkansas. Mama, as I called her, would go into church — and you have to picture Mama now as the living, the being of art. When Mama died, she was six-foot-two. Mama would get into church, sit in the mothers-of-the-church pew. The preacher was up there, but Mama never looked at him. She kept her eye on me in the children’s pew.

Fifteen minutes after the service began, the preacher would say, “And now we’ll be privileged with a song from Sister Henderson.” Every year, every Sunday, Mama would respond, “Me?”

Now when you’re young no one can so embarrass you as much as an adult to whom you are related, so I would just be mortified. I would die. I would think, “Mama, get up and sing. Everybody knows you’re going to sing. They even know what you’re going to sing. Mama, get up . . .” She would take her time, look all up in the sky as if she was considering, “What on earth could I possibly . . .” And every Sunday she sang the same song.

In Morocco, all alone on the stage, I sang her song:

*I’m a poor pilgrim of sorrow.
I’m lost in this wide world alone.*

I sang the whole song through, and when I finished 4,500 Arabs jumped up, hit the floor and started to shout. What? I told you how young I was and how ignorant. I had no idea the power of this inheritance. I just stood there and didn’t know what to do. I looked stage right and stage left at the singers, who had always treated me as if I were a mascot because I was no threat to them as a singer. Every night one or another of them would come out and almost pat my

head and say, “Maya, sorry to tell you, you flattened that E,” or, “Oh Maya, mm-mm, you sharpened that G!” I didn’t even know I was singing in the alphabet. How did I know?

But I looked at them now. I looked stage left and stage right, and they were all bunched up. I said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I have the glory . . .” They had sung Respighi, Rossini, Bach, Bloch, Beethoven — lovely little leiter and lovely little art songs of Purcell or Benjamin Britten, and they had been well received. And I had sung what Dr. Duboise called a sorrow song, not written by the free and easy, not written by anyone credited with having been creative, and 4,500 people had leapt into the palms of my hands. Why?

At some point the thinker must think, “Why?” I thought that night, “Oh, it’s because they feel sorry for the poignancy of my slave history.” I walked alone that night in Morocco, my first time in North Africa. I didn’t have the language. I thought, “What was that? Why did they do that?” Of course, as I later learned, the people in the audience had no idea of my slave history. Why, then?

I SUGGEST THAT THE GREAT ART belongs to all people, all the time — that indeed it is made for the people, by the people, to the people.

I have spoken through the black American experience, which I know intimately. I am always talking about the human condition and about American society in particular: what it is like to be human, what makes us weep, what makes us fall and stumble and somehow rise and go on from darkness into darkness and that darkness carpeted with figures of fear and the

**Art that does not increase
our understanding of this
particular journey or
our ability to withstand
this particular journey,
which is life, is an
exercise in futile
indulgence, a
demonstration of vapid
foppism.**

hounds behind and the hunters behind and one more river to cross and, oh my God, will I ever reach that somewhere, that safe-getting-up morning. I suggest to you that art allows us to stand erect.

I've told you a little about my hometown. Well, just a little bit more. I told you how small the town was. The church I belonged to was even smaller than any aspiration in the town — that is to say, it was the tiniest of churches. When all the members were there, when the sinners were there, the saved, the problematical, visitors, the afflicted, the children, we had thirty-two people in the whole church. And yet in that church I learned so much about the power of art to help human beings transcend almost anything. In today's climate in our country, which is sickened with the pollution of pollution, threatened with the prominence of AIDS, riddled with burgeoning racism, rife with growing huddles of the homeless, we need art and we need art in all forms. We need all methods of art to be present, everywhere present, and all the time present.

My grandmother in that little town used to pass me when I would be reading poetry . . . you see, I was a mute from the time I was seven and a half until I was twelve and a half. I had voice, but I refused to use it. For five years. And my grandmother would pass me and say, "Sister, Mama loves to see you read the poetry because that will put starch in your backbone." Had our adversaries in this country ever known the potency of the black American arts, there is no doubt in my mind that they would have labeled certain poems, lyrics, ideas, and dances too vulgar for anyone's consumption. In fact, if we had been considered equal to other Americans, all our blues and most of our spiritual lyrics would have been banned. Our dances and poems would have been sequestered, and our very survival would have been imperiled.

When people who were enslaved, enchained, whose wrists were bound and whose ankles were tied, sang:

*I'm gonna run on,
See what the end is gonna be . . .
I'm gonna run on,
See what the end is gonna be . . .*

THE SINGER AND THE COMPREHENDING AUDIENCE were made to understand that, however we arrived here, under whatever bludgeonings of chance, we were the stuff out of which nations and dreams were made and that we had come here to stay.

*I'm gonna run on,
See what the end is gonna be . . .*

Had the blues been censored, we might have had no way to know that our looks were not only acceptable but even desirable. The larger society informed us all the time — and still does — that its idea of beauty can be contained in the cruel, limiting, ignorant, and still-current statement which suggests you can't be too thin or too rich or too white. But we had the 19th-century blues in which a black man informed us, talking about the woman that he loved:

*The woman I love is fat
And chocolate to the bone,
And every time she shakes,
Some skinny woman loses her home.*

This shred of the folksong found its way into Mr. W.C. Handy's 20th-century blues. This was the way we stood erect, when the larger society said that everything black was bad. People could, and still do, actually stand looking out of a window at serious snow falling like cotton rain, covering the tops of cars and streets and fireplugs and human beings walking, look out at that and say, "My God, it's a black day."

So black people had to find ways in which to assert their own beauty. In this song, the black woman sang:

*He's blacker than midnight,
Teeth like flags of truth.*

*He's the finest thing in the whole St. Louis.
They say the blacker the berry,*

Sweeter is the juice . . .

That's living art.

I suggest that we must be very suspicious of censors, who say they mean to prohibit our art for our own welfare. I suggest that we have to question their

motives and tend assiduously to our own personal and national health and our general welfare. We must replace fear and chauvinism, hate, timidity, and apathy, which flow in our national spinal column. We must replace those negatives with courage, sensitivity, perseverance, and, I even dare say, “love.” And by “love,” I don’t mean mush nor do I mean sentimentality. I mean that condition in the human spirit so profound it encourages us to develop courage. It is said that courage is the most important of all the virtues, because without courage you can’t practice any other virtue with consistency. I wish I had said that first; actually Aristotle did. Never mind.

We must infuse our lives with art. Our national leaders must be informed that we want them to use our taxes to support street theater in order to oppose street gangs. We should have a well-supported regional theater in order to oppose regionalism and differences which keep us apart. We need nationally to support small, medium, and large art museums which show us images of ourselves, those we like and those we dislike. In some way, very important to us, we need to see those we dislike even more than those we like because somehow we get glancing visions of how we look “as through a window, darkly.”

Our singers, our composers, our musicians must be encouraged to sing the song of struggle, the song of resistance, resistance to degradation, resistance to our humiliation, resistance to the eradication of all our values which would keep us going as a country. Our actors and sculptors and painters and writers and poets must be made to know that we appreciate them, that in fact it is their very work which puts starch in our backbones.

In looking at that resistance, which the artist shows us when she or he is about the business — whether it is a piece of sculpture in the gardens in Winston-Salem, or a painting in a museum in New York, or the exhibits which have caused so many people to take particular stands to the right or to the left, oft-times obliterating, standing in front of the very art which we need to see; whether it is a simple folksong or the most complex piece of symphonic music; whether it is tap dance or toe dance — I do believe that those efforts of the artist help us to see ourselves as human beings, allow us to get up in the morning, one more morning, and face one more day in which we might have to deal with the people who hate us, people who belittle us.

THERE IS NO PERSON in this room who hasn’t already been paid for. Whether our ancestors came from Ireland in the 1840s, trying to escape the potato blight; whether they came from Asia, in the 1840s, to build the railroad and the country, unable legally to bring their mates for eight decades; whether they came from Eastern Europe, trying to escape the pogroms, arriving at Ellis Island, having their names changed to something unpronounceable; whether they came from South America, trying to find a better place for their progeny; whether they came from Africa, lying spoon-fashion in the filthy hatches of slave ships — they have already paid for us, without any chance of ever getting to know what our faces would look like, what our names would be, what personalities we would develop.

I often wonder what would happen if I could come face to face with a grandparent, a great-great-grandparent. Suppose you did? Just imagine. What would happen? Not a specter, a real person, 200 years old, who said, “So. So you’re the reason I took it, huh? You’re the reason I pressed across this country, in a Conestoga. You’re the reason. You’re the reason I fought and killed the people who lived there, so I could get the land. You’re the reason, are you?” Or, “I was on the land, and these strange people came across the place, shooting firesticks, and I fought to save the land for you. So you’re the reason, eh?”

“You’re the reason I hung on the side of the Appalachian mountains, holding onto sticks and stones, eating ashes. You’re the reason, are you?”

“You’re the reason I took the lash, you’re it, huh? So you’re the reason I took the auction block, and stayed alive . . . you’re it, are you? How is it with you? How are you doing with the gifts I gave you?”

Now I don’t know about you, but I know I would spend a lot of time saying, “Well, um, I mean, I was really, I really . . . I mean, if I thought, well, I’m . . . you know, I’m going to do, ah, you don’t know what I’m going to do . . .”

Well, my grandmother had one song she sang at home, and I want to suggest this song to you all, to the arts community, to all of us in particular. Mama, who could sing birds out of the trees, would always respond, when I would say, “Mama, sing something,” she’d say, “Go on, sister, you know Mama can’t sing.”

But if you left her alone at home, she would sing:

*I shall not, I shall not be removed.
I shall not, I shall not be removed.
Just like a tree . . .*

I'd say, "Mama, it is not 'removed.' It's just 'moved.'" My grandmother would say, "Yes, sister, Mama know," then sing:

I shall not, I shall not be removed . . .

I SUGGEST THAT THE ART OF THE ARTIST

is in taking that particular stand, to be flexible so that one can learn, open so that one can learn, flexible so one can bend, resilient so that one can stand erect after being knocked down. I think the artist must say, inside herself, inside himself, "I shall not be moved."

*She lay, skin down on the moist dirt,
the canebreaks rustling
with the whisper of leaves, and
loud longing of hounds and
the ransack of hunters
{crackling the near branches.*

*She muttered, lifting her head a nod
{toward freedom,
I shall not, I shall not be moved.*

*She gathered her babies,
their tears slick as oil on black faces,
their young eyes canvassing
{mornings of madness.
Mama, is master going to sell you
from us tomorrow?*

*Yes.
Unless you keep walking more
and talking less.
Yes.
Unless the keeper of our lives
releases me from all commandments.
Yes.
And your lives,
never mine to live,
will be executed upon*

*{the killing floor of innocents.
Unless you match my heart and words,
and say with me,*

I shall not be moved.

*In Virginia tobacco fields,
leaning into the curve
on Steinway
pianos, along Arkansas roads,
in the red hills of Georgia,
into the palms of her chained hands, she
cried against calamity,
You have to tried to destroy me
and I perish daily,*

I shall not be moved.

*Her universe, often
summarized into one black body
falling finally from the tree to her feet,
made her cry each time in a new voice.
All my past hastens to defeat,
and strangers claim the glory of my love,
Iniquity has bound me to this bed,*

yet, I must not be moved.

*She heard the names,
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:
nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,
mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon,
whore, hot tail, thing, it.
She said, But my description cannot
fit your tongue, for
I have a certain way of being in this world,
and I shall not, I shall not be moved.*

*No angel stretched protecting wings
above the heads of her children,
fluttering and urging the winds of reason
into the confusion of their lives.
They sprouted like young weeds,
but she could not shield their growth
from the grinding blades of ignorance, nor
shape them into symbolic topiaries.*

*She sent them away,
underground, overland, in coaches and
shoeless.*

When you learn, teach.

When you get, give.

As for me,

I shall not be moved.

She stood in midocean, seeking dry land.

She searched for God's face.

Assured,

she placed her fire of service

on the altar, and though

clothed in the finery of faith,

when she appeared at the temple door,

no sign welcomed

Black Grandmother. Enter here.

Into the crashing sound,

into wickedness, she cried,

No one, no, nor no one million

ones dare deny me God. I go forth

alone, and stand as ten thousand.

The Divine upon my right

impels me to pull forever

at the latch on Freedom's gate.

The Holy Spirit upon my left leads my

feet without ceasing into the camp of the

righteous and into the tents of the free.

These momma faces, lemon-yellow,

{plum-purple,

honey-brown, have grimaced and twisted

down a pyramid of years.

She is Sheba and Sojourner,

Harriet and Zora,

Mary Bethune and Angela,

Annie to Zenobia.

She stands

before the abortion clinic,

confounded by the lack of choices.

In the Welfare line,

reduced to the pity of handouts.

Ordained in the pulpit, shielded

by the mysteries.

In the operating room,

husbanding life.

In the choir loft,

holding God in her throat.

On lonely street corners,

hawking her body.

In the classroom, loving the

children to understanding.

Centered on the world's stage,

she sings to her loves and beloveds,

to her foes and detractors:

However I am perceived and deceived,

however my ignorance and conceits,

lay aside your fears that I will be undone,

for I shall not be moved. ■

⁴ Maya Angelou, "Our Grandmothers," *I Shall Not Be Moved* (New York: Random House, 1990).

Maya Angelou

Poet, playwright, actress, musician, scriptwriter, producer, director, Maya Angelou was recipient of the Chubb Fellowship Award from Yale University (1970), the Women in Communications, Inc. Matrix Award (1983) and the North Carolina Award in Literature (1987). Angelou holds honorary Doctorate degrees from more than 30 schools, and in 1981 was appointed the first Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University. She has published numerous books of poetry, essays and prose, among them her best selling *I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*. In 1971, Angelou's *Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water Before I Diiie* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. In 1993, Angelou wrote "On the Pulse of Morning" at President Clinton's request for his inauguration ceremony. At the Million Man March in 1995, Angelou delivered "From a Black Woman to a Black Man." During the 60s, under Dr. Martin Luther King, she served as Northern Coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.