Giving Thanks

Celebrated author and poet Maya Angelou looks back on 80 years of blessings. By Dawn Reiss. Photographs by Beth Perkins.
"I'm grateful for being here, for being able to think, for being able to see, for being able to taste, for appreciating love — for knowing that it exists in a world so rife with vulgarity, with brutality and violence, and yet love exists. I'm grateful to know that it exists. And I'm grateful to know it exists in me, and I'm able to share it with so many people."

Angelou's feelings of appreciation are part of the reason that Thanksgiving is one of her favorite times of the year. Her most prized possessions are her family members and friends, of which she has many, and Thanksgiving affords her time to spend on nothing but them. This month, as she's done for many Novembers, she'll host between 200 and 250 of her "beloveds" at her home in North Carolina (Oprah Winfrey has been a guest in the past), where they'll take part in an elaborate Thanksgiving celebration. The festivities will go on for four days — just long enough for Angelou to properly give thanks for each and every one of her blessings.

Of course, blessings weren't always as apparent or as plentiful in her past as they are now. Angelou's tumultuous life has been, quite literally, an open book, as she has documented her early struggles in six different autobiographies. Marguerite Ann "Maya" Johnson was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1928. Her parents divorced when she was three, and her mother sent her and her older brother, Bailey, to the rural, segregated town of Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, whom they adoringly called "Momma."

Angelou and her brother would eventually return to St. Louis, where — as Angelou detailed in her first and still most famous work to date, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings — she endured several traumatic experiences and remained mute for years after as a result. Angelou was then sent back to Stamps to live with her wise and strong-willed grandmother, who taught her a great deal about life.

"You know how they say you only have so many teachable moments?" Angelou asks with a laugh. "Well, my grandmother caught me at every one."

One of the most important — and most frequent — lessons Henderson taught her granddaughter was to not be a complainer. As the only African-American store owner in Stamps, Henderson endured her share
ends meet and provide for her son. Always a lover of the stage, she got the chance to join a touring production of the George Gershwin opera Porgy and Bess in 1954. When the show traveled to Europe, she was forced to leave her then-eight-year-old son with her mother. Several months passed, and Angelou was so consumed with guilt over abandoning her son that she left the production early and returned home. That’s when she suffered a breakdown.

She visited a psychiatrist, whom she describes as a "young white man in a Brooks Brothers suit, a button-down shirt, and a tie." She felt she couldn’t relate to the doctor one," Angelou says.

Eventually, she reached the end of the long, twisting tunnel, but not before collecting enough life experiences to fill a half dozen memoirs. She became a passionate civil rights activist and worked for — and befriended — both Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. She did stints as a journalist and a teacher overseas, spending time in Ghana and Egypt. She studied filmmaking in Sweden and later became the first African-American woman to have a screenplay produced (1972's Georgia, Georgia). And she fell in and out of love with many men as she went, even marrying a few of them. Just how many times she’s walked down the aisle, though, is one of those numbers she prefers not to count.

Angelou has a multitude of other accomplishments that she’s too humble to enumerate: She’s won three spoken-word Grammys and a National Book Award and has been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, an Emmy, and a Tony. She’s written songs for musicians such as B.B. King and Clint Black, and she recited an original poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," at President Bill Clinton’s inauguration in 1993. She is fluent in six languages, has earned more than 50 honorary degrees, and was granted the first lifetime Reynolds Professorship of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem. The professorship is an honor she holds particularly dear, as she considers herself first and foremost a poet, an author, or a playwright but a teacher. This calling goes back to yet another of her grandmother’s lessons: “When you get, give,” Henderson instructed her. “When you learn, teach.”

There’s also Angelou’s considerable feat of writing those 30 books, which have earned her a legion of fans. Today, in addition to hosting a weekly radio show on Sirius XM Satellite Radio’s Oprah & Friends channel, the octogenarian is hard at work on her next two books, one of which is a counterpart to Letter to My Daughter that will be titled Letter to My Son.

This month, however, she’ll put her work aside as she celebrates Thanksgiving with the blessings in her life. Her excitement is obvious as she describes the traditions of their yearly gatherings. Wednesday night, the group congregates at her friend’s home for cocktails and hors d’oeuvres. Thursday,
she says, is “the only nonoptional day, because we have dinner.” On Friday, guests get to explore the city and attend a barbecue hosted by another of Angelou’s close friends. And on Saturday, Angelou and some author friends go to nearby bookstores to do signings. The celebration’s grand finale comes that evening, when what Angelou calls the “family presentation” — a talent show of sorts.

“People who can sing, do,” she says. “Those who can’t sing do too. People dance. People tell stories to entertain each other.

“I’ve never allowed a television camera in,” she adds. “Some people are very famous, and some are not.”

Though Angelou says she rarely does more than tell a joke at the presentations — “I have so many years on everyone,” she reasons — she merily regales me with story after story of her guests’ performances over the years. She tells of one year when her relative, photographer Margaret Courtney-Clarke, brought accomplished Italian musician Alessandro Alessandroni to the festivities. “He told the group, ‘I didn’t bring my guitar, but I can whistle,’” Angelou recalls. “It turned out that he’s a composer and performer of whistling music in the Spaghetti Westerns, like For a Few Dollars More. It was just fantastic.” Another year, two friends — one black, one white — who both came from Vaudevillian backgrounds performed a routine together.

“Our people are all sorts: We are black and white, Asian and Spanish-speaking, young and old,” she says. “We are able to look past complexion and see community. ... The truth is, we are more alike than we are unalike as human beings. We really pretty much all want the same things.”

She reaches for her glass of apple juice again, the lines on her hands deep with experience, and she grows reflective. As she’s looked back on her past this afternoon, she can’t help but also think of the future, and to Thanksgivings when her grandchildren and their children will be enjoying their own traditions.

“I may be remembered as this tall, mean black lady, but I hope not,” she says, smiling. “I hope I’ll be remembered as kind and generous and funny and loving and brave.”

And grateful. Always grateful. 

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