



**Maya Angelou** is a poet, writer, performer, teacher, director, and life-time African American activist. Among her many published works are a five-volume autobiography, which began in 1970 with *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, and the collections of verse *And Still I Rise* and *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die*. In 1993, she wrote and read the poem *On the Pulse of Morning* at Bill Clinton's presidential inauguration, at his request. It was only the second time a poet had been asked to read at an inauguration, the first being Robert Frost at the inauguration of John F. Kennedy.



§ CHAPTER ONE §

# Letter to My Daughter

*Maya Angelou*

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Dear Daughter,

This letter has taken an extraordinary time getting itself together. I have all along known that I wanted to tell you directly of some lessons I have learned and under what conditions I have learned them.

My life has been long, and believing that life loves the liver of it, I have dared to try many things, sometimes trembling, but daring, still.

There have been people in my life who meant me well, taught me valuable lessons, and others who have meant me ill, and have given me ample notification that my world is not meant to be all peaches and cream.

I have made many mistakes and no doubt will make more before I die. When I have seen pain, when I have found that my ineptness has caused displeasure, I have learned to accept my responsibility and to forgive myself first, then to apologize to anyone injured by my misreckoning. Since I cannot un-live history, and repentance is all I can offer God, I have hopes that my sincere apologies were accepted.

You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them. Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud. Do not complain. Make every effort to change things you do not like. If you cannot make a change, change the way you have been thinking. You might find a new solution.

Never whine. Whining lets a brute know that a victim is in the neighborhood.

Be certain that you do not die without having done something wonderful for humanity.

I gave birth to one child, a son, but I have thousands of daughters. You are Black and White, Jewish and Muslim, Asian, Spanish-speaking, Native American and Aleut. You are fat and thin and pretty and plain, gay and straight, educated and unlettered, and I am speaking to you all. Here is my offering to you.

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### **Keep the Faith**

Many things continue to amaze me, even well into my seventh decade. I'm startled or at least taken aback when people walk up to me and without being questioned inform me that they are Christians. My first response is the question "Already?"

It seems to me that becoming a Christian is a lifelong endeavor. I believe that is also true for one wanting to become a Buddhist, or a Muslim, a Jew, Jainist, or a Taoist. The persons striving to live their religious beliefs know that the idyllic condition cannot be arrived at and held on to eternally. It is in the search itself that one finds the ecstasy.

The Depression, which was so difficult for everyone to survive, was especially so for a single black woman in the Southern states tending her crippled adult son and raising two small grandchildren.

One of my earliest memories of my grandmother, who was called "Mamma," is a glimpse of that tall, cinnamon-colored woman with a deep, soft voice, standing thousands of feet up in the air with nothing visible beneath her.

Whenever she confronted a challenge, Mamma would clasp her hands behind her back, look up as if she could will herself into the heavens, and draw herself up to her full six-foot height. She would tell her family in particular, and the world in general, “I don’t know how to find the things we need, but I will step out on the word of God. I am trying to be a Christian and I will just step out on the word of God.” Immediately I could see her flung into space, moons at her feet and stars at her head, comets swirling around her shoulders. Naturally, since she was over six feet tall, and stood out on the word of God, she was a giant in heaven. It wasn’t difficult for me to see Mamma as powerful, because she had the word of God beneath her feet.

Thinking of my grandmother years later, I wrote a gospel song that has been sung rousinglly by the Mississippi Mass choir.

*“You said to lean on your arm  
And I am leaning  
You said to trust in your love  
And I am trusting  
You said to call on your name  
And I am calling  
I’m stepping out on your word.”*

Whenever I began to question whether God exists, I looked up to the sky and surely there, right there, between the sun and moon, stands my grandmother, singing a long meter hymn, a song somewhere between a moan and a lullaby and I know faith is the evidence of things unseen.

And all I have to do is continue trying to be a Christian.