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Karen A. Waldron

Trinity University, kwaldron@trinity.edu

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Sources of Courage: An Interview with Dr. Maya Angelou

Karen A. Waldron

She knew poverty and racism intimately as a child in Stamps, Arkansas, hiding her “crippled Uncle Willie” under sacks of onions in a truck to escape his lynching by “The Boys.” A brutal sexual assault at age eight, with her attacker beaten to death afterwards, sent her into silence for years as she feared the power of her own words. Yet, Maya Angelou learned that words were the way to set herself free. Encouraged by “Mama,” her grandmother who knew that this voiceless child would become a great teacher, she has been awarded 56 honorary doctorates, several Golden Globe awards, and nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for her poetry in *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'fore I Die* (1971). She wrote graphic accounts of her young years in award-winning *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), followed by scores of books and dramatic outpourings evidenced by her role as the first African American woman screenwriter and director in Hollywood.

Touring internationally in *Porgy and Bess*, she embodied pure musical tradition, crediting her success to listening to “Mama’s voice, like that of Mahalia Jackson,” and to the power of “my inherited art”—African American music. Her passion for social justice brought a close friendship with Martin Luther King, whom she memorialized in her lyrics “King: A Musical Testimony.” But it was her four years in Africa that allowed her to embrace the vibrant history she felt had been lost by so many in America. She writes, “African culture is alive and well. An African proverb spells out the truth: *The ax forgets. The tree remembers.*”

In this interview, Dr. Angelou reflects candidly on courage, exploring life’s dreams to the fullest, and her vision of freedom for all women.

In your life, where have you found the courage to take such phenomenal risks?

Dr. Angelou: Years ago, I deduced that it costs everything to win, and that it costs everything to lose. So, if I didn't take a risk, if I didn't take a dare, then I would lose everything. And if I did take the dare, if I lost-- I'd lose the same thing. But I might win. So since everything is always at stake, I may as well risk everything for the good thing.

So when I was asked if I would conduct the Boston Pops, I said, "Yes, of course." Now it's true I've gone to a few concerts at one time in my life, and I've been conducted, and I've put together choirs. But the Boston Pops with Keith Lockhart as the Maestro?!! I said "Yes" because ten more years might pass before another woman might be invited, and twenty years might pass before another African American woman might be invited. I said "Yes," and I got a book and I read, and I found out what music they were planning to play. I put that on my tape recorder, and I played it all around my house. I played it in my bus. I played it in my car. And on that day in Massachusetts, I stepped up and conducted the Boston Pops.

I sent a message that I enjoyed it so much that I'd be glad to do it a second time. But I was told they'd never invited anyone a second time. They had Ted Kennedy there that evening. So I said, "Well, that's alright then, but I'd be glad to do it." And I was invited the next year to do it again. So, had I not risked, I could always say, "Well, you know I was invited," but not what it felt like. Would I have opened the door for someone else who's coming behind me? No, I wouldn't have. As it is now, I've opened the door and had fun doing it too.

Has this thought that if I don't do it I'll never get there, and if I do it I may get somewhere, been a predominant theme for you in taking risks, then?

Dr. Angelou: Yes, absolutely, since my early adulthood; yes, in fact, late teens. Yes.

What advice would you give other women about how they can demonstrate courage and explore their life dreams?

Dr. Angelou: I would encourage women to know first that I don't believe that anyone is born with courage. I think you develop it. And life's inventions can help you or discourage you to develop courage. If you're born in a silk handkerchief and all you ever have to do is wonder about powdering your nose, then of course, you may not have to have courage. Of course you may be a lackey and not know it.

But if life offers you difficulties, that's the time to develop courage. You use each one of the disappointments, each one of the insults, each one of the rejections as a time to develop courage. You don't develop courage, and all of a sudden you just burst out and say: "I have the courage to do this or that." I think you develop it the same way you develop muscles. In the physical muscles, if you want to pick up a hundred-pound weight you don't go there and pick that up. You start with five-pound weights, ten-pound weights, twenty. You continue to strengthen yourself and sooner or later you will be able to pick up a hundred-pound weight.

I think that a woman ought to start with small things. For instance, don't stay in a room where women are being bashed. If somebody says, "Well, you know that little chic? That little blonde chic's a bimbo." Get out! Don't stay in the room where there's racial pejoratives bandied about which are meant to demean or diminish and de-humanize people. Don't stay in a room where sex and sexuality are a mock. "So the gay...or straight..." and this and that. No matter what device you have to use: Get Out!

And once you're out, you don't even have to say anything right away. You may not have the courage to say anything. But Get Out! And then you'll like yourself so much more. Once you're out in the street, in your car, on the subway--once you're out, Wow! I really got out of

there. I lied and said I had to be in Bangkok, but I got out of there. And little, by little, by little, you develop the courage. Sooner or later, and probably much later, you will sit in that room and say: "I'm sorry I don't welcome this kind of conversation."

Do you have a dream or a vision for women?

Dr. Angelou: Well, I have one great-granddaughter and I have a granddaughter-in-law. I have a daughter-in-law and I have so many daughters. So many...of every race you can imagine. You think only God could have brought those together! And I'm Mom to a lot of people: Asian, Latino, White, African, and African-American, Jewish. Mostly, I wish each one the vision to see themselves Free.

I was married for about two hundred and fifty years to a builder. It was my best marriage. And he taught me to build. He said, "Building has nothing to do with strength or with sex, with gender. It has to do with insight. If you can see it, you can build it. But you must see it."

So I wish women could see themselves Free. Just see and imagine what they could do if they were free of the national and international history of diminishment. Just imagine, if we could have a Madame Curie in the nineteenth century, suppose that twenty other women had been liberated at the same time? Is it possible that we would have gotten small pox and chicken pox and measles and other un-social diseases obliterated? Just imagine, try to envision if, in this country, African Americans were not in a holding position because of racism. Imagine if all that energy and intelligence and enthusiasm could be put to the use of the school system, to the economy: If they envision.

So that's what I wish for women: See it. Try to see yourself Free. What would you do? One thing, you'd be kinder. You'd give over gossiping. A plague. Yeah, you'd stop it. If you

could see yourself Free, you would know that you deserve the best. And if you deserve the best, then you will give the best and you will only accept the best.

Do you feel that one individual can begin to make a difference?

Dr. Angelou: Oh, I know that one individual can make a difference. I know it because I know so many people made differences in my life. And then, I have gone on to make differences in a lot of people's lives. And so, some of the people who've made the differences for me were an African American grandmother who'd gone to the fifth grade. An uncle who was crippled, who never left the town because he was ashamed of being crippled. But the difference he made in my life and in the lives of others can't even be computed. We don't go that high.

So, as the one person, first you have to start to be good to yourself. All virtues and vices begin at home, then spread abroad. So you must, women must, be good to themselves. First off, forgive yourself for the stupid things you've done. And then go to the person whom you may have injured and ask for forgiveness. If the person says: "I will never forgive you," you say: "Well, that's your business. My job was to ask for it. And I ask it with all my heart and you can't forgive me. I'm finished with it. I've done what I was supposed to do."

But you have to start with yourself first. Forgive yourself. And then see yourself as you want to be and then begin to work toward it. With a will and a way, and with laughter, with humor, with strength, with passion, with compassion, with style, and with love.