Maya Angelou

Poet, playwright, autobiographer, actress, teacher, traveler, lover, she sings of the soaring spirit within us all.
A Pilgrim Shining

by Brooke Pacy

Even as she moves in passionate pursuit of people and possibility, Maya Angelou stays within the still center.

TWO WEEKS before the Clinton inaugural, "On the Pulse of Morning" still incomplete, Maya Angelou looked out past a TV lighting crew at her community of Wake Forest University well-wishers. There was a moment of quiet. Palpable affection flowed between the imposing woman in black and gold and the diverse friends focused by her potent presence. Then the extraordinary voice pealed out, a bronze bell lined in brown velvet, and welcomed them. She felt humbled by a gathering she saw as a mirror of the U.S.—the "black and brown and beige and red and white faces" looking expectantly at her. With the humor and perception that inform her life and work, she distinguished between her humility and modesty: "Modesty is a learned affectation. When life pushes the modest person against the wall, the modesty drops off with an alacrity which is embarrassing. But humility comes from the inside out. It says someone was here before me, found the path, laid the road, and beck-
Elizabeth Phillips recalls the "magical performance" Angelou gave on her first visit to Wake Forest.

"Younked me along, and supported me along."

Naming the friends whose particular concern and love in the last twelve years have moved her forward and helped her create a home in Winston-Salem—"Lucille and Carl [Harris], Ed Wilson, Elizabeth Phillips, Eva Rodtwitt, Dolly McPherson"—she asked the blessing of all present for her poem: "You people out there who pray, pray for me—by name. Don't just say 'God bless everybody,' or 'Lord bless all tall black ladies'—pray for Maya Angelou."

Undoubtedly, the prayers were heartfelt.

The gentle community of scholars of which Ms. Angelou is now a part has recognized and welcomed her delightedly from the start.

Wake Forest is a remarkable creation, a traditionally academic Southern college that prides itself on being first of all a teaching institution, but which tries to eschew narrow focus and provide a comfortable matrix for the work of nonconformists. President Thomas K. Hearn Jr. proclaims resistance to hierarchical models for a climate that is "hybrid, heterodox, and unorthodox." Faculty members know and support one another's writing, so that no one writes alone in the void. The academic community has broadened gradually since the forties to include female and African American professors. Women constitute 23 percent of the current faculty, occupy administrative positions, and have been recognized for excellence, most recently, when Elizabeth Phillips, the first tenured woman and only female chair of the English department, received the Medallion of Merit and women's athletics pioneers Marge Crisp and Dot Casey became the first female Hall of Fame inductees.

Yet, as sociology professor and researcher Willie Pearson remarks, an African American has yet to become an academic dean or department head at Wake Forest, so it is all the more remarkable that Maya Angelou was offered in 1981 the first Reynolds Professorship in American Studies, an endowed chair funded by the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation which allows her to design her own courses and carry a light teaching load in order to write, accept speaking engagements, and knit herself into the life of Winston-Salem. There, she has bridged distances, according to Ed Wilson, between separate communities—black and white, town and gown, Winston-Salem and the cosmopolitan world of the arts. Admiring colleagues report that her home expands the concept of extended family. It is a mini-UN, a mecca for people of various shapes, colors, and persuasions. "Fat or skinny, gay or straight," says Pearson, they are welcome at her generous and excellent table. She makes room in her house for students, abused women, all sorts of human beings who need a temporary haven.

Some of these became known to her through the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in whose life she is deeply involved as a parishioner. She has adopted needy families and provided Christmas for others; she underwrote the salary of a staff member, making possible a senior day care program to assist frail elderly members, and she helped provide playground equipment for the Child Development Center. Dr. Serenus Churn, Mt. Zion's rector, is most thankful, however, for her presence and participation. He says of Ms. Angelou that "no inauthentic note is ever sounded by her." She awakens members to the bracing air of possibility as she performs readings in conjunction with the youth choir, delivers the Children's Message at a service, or brings Oprah Winfrey with her to church, real and live, to be greeted and seen close up. With her unerringly accurate approach to an audience, Ms. Angelou inspires adolescents to write—specifically two young men, undistinguished academically, who saw their own pieces published in the local paper.

Student interest may have sparked the series of connections that drew Ms. Angelou back to her native South and Wake Forest. One evening, Betty Rankin ('74) gave her poetry professor Elizabeth Phillips the recently published first volume of the Angelou autobiography, I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Captivated, Phillips read it in one night. A black awareness group brought Ms. Angelou to campus, and Phillips remem-
Her home expands the concept of extended family. It is a mini-UN, a mecca for people of various shapes, colors, and persuasions.

...bers a magical performance—"she read, she sang, she danced, she teased, she signed..." Dean Tom Mullen approached Ms. Angelou afterward and said, "If you ever want to retire or just to teach for awhile, we will make a room for you here at Wake Forest."

"How lovely and how beautifully offered," remembers Ms. Angelou now. She says "beau-ti-ful-ly," her voice blessing each syllable.

During the rap session that followed her performance, Phillips's friend and colleague, Eva Rodt Witt, invited Angelou and her friend, Dolly McPherson, home for a drink. The close kinship that unites these four women emerged in the long evening of conversation, but they expected never to meet again.

Later, Phillips and Provost Edwin G. Wilson thought McPherson might fill an American literature opening in the English department, and she became the first full-time female African American faculty member. Tough-minded and demanding on herself and her students, she is gathering academic steam at a time of life when many think about retirement. She has a Reynolds grant to explore the autobiographical consciousness in the African diaspora, a logical extension of the doctoral dissertation she wrote on Maya Angelou's autobiography after coming to Wake Forest and later published as Order Out of Chaos. Her lucid and beautiful reading of the five Angelou volumes testifies to her insight as Angelou's chosen sister and most beloved friend. The two women plumb each other's minds, intuiting thoughts not yet conscious. Extolling this enduring and vital bond, Willie Pearson says, "Dolly is like a sister or a mother to Maya, protective, one of those few who would throw down the gauntlet for her, accept her just the way she is."

When Ms. Angelou thanked her colleagues for their congratulations on January 6, the television crews lit up a scene that evoked recurrent Angelou themes—threads of a life tightly woven into the art of reconstructing itself through poetry and autobiography. Her experience is so deeply integrated that, as a great novel opened at random will yield a paragraph suggestive of the entire work, so a moment in her life resonates with the history of her developing consciousness, with the romantic, heroic process that truth-finding and truth-telling require.

"Heroic" is not too strong a word. Dolly McPherson compares aspects of Maya Angelou's life to the "picaresque," placing her in the tradition of fictional adventurers

Her closest friend and a noted critic of her work, Dolly McPherson is like a sister or a mother to Angelou.

—Don Quixote, Huck Finn—all those who leave home to know the world and create themselves in discovering it (or the reverse). Aspects of her life story recall legend and myth. Born Marguerite Johnson, she was sent away by parents whose faces she was too young to later remember and raised through early childhood by the wise woman, Grandmother Henderson, who taught her the strength of faith, dignity, and communality in Stamps, Arkansas. There she learned also to feel unloved and to yearn. Like heroes of ancient Greece, she faced death and the underworld in her raped, guilt, and subsequent voluntary muteness—during which five years she says she became an "ear," listening and reflecting with an exile's wistfulness, as Malory's Arthur, revisited by T. H. White, does in the years with Merlin. Her own Merlin at this moment was Bertha Flowers. She rescued Marguerite from silence with poetry, giving her courage to pull her own sword, language, out of the stone and wield it to dissolve cage bars, rename herself, carve out a home great enough to answer her yearning, and seek an end to exile.

The caged bird sings with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still...
Diedra Jones remembers a class with Angelou as the highlight of her Wake Forest undergraduate experience.

Like Arthur, Ms. Angelou longed for magnum-nimous kinship and a nobler, less brutish world. She sought the true home, “the place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” In searching, she has had to free herself from a series of cages, internal and external. At first, in segregated Stamps, there was the petite, blonde ideal image that denied the tall, brown child’s true beauty and alienated her from herself; later, paralyzing terror at the power of her own words when the rapist she named in court was killed. She opened one cage door only to meet another as she moved out from Stamps to California, New York, Europe, and Africa—the evasions she encountered trying to join the WACs, the obtuse timidity of her son’s teachers in the face of truth, the constraints laid on her by two controlling husbands. The most unyielding bars were forged out of historical perspective, her heavy consciousness of African treachery and American slavery. In All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes, Ms. Angelou speaks of being caught tragically between two homelands that are not home: self-assured Africa—where the “odor of old slavery” isolated Black Americans, and where she realized the U.S. flag they jeered for its hypocrisy was their only flag—and cruelly complacent White America. She capitalizes “Black” and “White” as she capitalizes “South,” as though they were distinct territories. In her poem “Family Affairs,” history seems too wide a desert to cross with friendship. The woman whose “seas of golden hair” invited princes to her tower cannot expect suddenly to “step lightly over . . . centuries of horror” and befriend the woman whose “dusty braids” left ruts on an African beach.

S. ANGELOU has lived like a trapeze artist, letting go and reaching out for the next opportunity. She could leave her car, all she owned, in a San Diego railroad station to start a new life with her three-year-old son. She read, cooked, sang, danced, loved men who betrayed her, moved on, married, left because the marriage was “sterile” once the spirit had gone out of it, wrote, edited, acted, married, resisted when she couldn’t “stand not knowing where her air was coming from,” traveled, walked out on a houseful of servants and expensive furniture to begin anew when her second marriage dissolved and her son declared his independence in Africa . . . and always she read—the phenomenal willingness to reinvolve herself fueled by her romantic imagination. In the midst of despair, she could read the signals, recognize and seize the offered hand; she could transform the experience into light and renewed hope, into the epiphanies McPherson sees as giving the Angelou life story “power and value.”

Grandmother Henderson, who transcended the insults of white children through stoic dignity and slapped young Marguerite for her obliquely impious “by the way,” instilled in her a powerful religious heritage, channeled an instinct for truth, and rooted her in communality. She learned through discipline “that the behavior of one in that Southern Black community over time affected the lives of all.” “Arrogance,” the foregrounding of the self, had to be controlled for safety’s sake in a town where to be noticed by whites was to endanger all blacks. Here and in other, freer black communities, one member’s need belonged to all. No matter in what direction she would strike out independently, she would feel bound to all those who shared her history, and she would quite naturally and without narcissism choose the autobiographical form to celebrate her own discovery of world and self as a voice speaking for all African Americans. She explains the title of her second
Ms. Angelou has lived like a trapeze artist, letting go and reaching out for the next opportunity.

volume, Gather Together in My Name, saying, "Until such time as they too need to tell the truth until it hurts, these men and women can gather together in my name and be heard."

These conservative cultural influences were profound sources of a power that enabled her, paradoxically, to relinquish security time and time again, moving radically out on her own only to discover an ever larger sense of community. She found courage early to rise to occasions and to jettison a safety she found inadequate or confining. She defied a husband who tried to control her spiritual life, and, in entering the world of performing arts, she left, gradually, the "sanctity" and "safety" to be found "in the state of victimization" for brilliance and acclaim. She grew into a brave new name and could look back, laughing wryly at an earlier pattern: "Oh, the holiness of always being the injured party." Now, she steps up to a national podium to tell us we must transcend the "bruising darkness" of our terrible history if we are to heal our strange divisions.

She heals her own with the voice she has found—or learned. In language as immediate as sunlight, as precisely forged as a scalpel, she names her enemies and chronicles her pain and triumph, dancing on fragile word-bridges over chasms, sometimes singing sonorously, sometimes laughing—wry or generous laughter that includes herself. Often, her poetry searches for hope or connection even in despair.

Questioned now about the assurance that allowed her to begin university teaching in her fifties, Ms. Angelou says, "I haven't found myself put out of joint by any world. I know that if I'm invited into a world and I accept the invitation, I am going to comport myself wonderfully." She laughs, an infectious sound that wells up from a deep place. "Not everything I do will be brilliant, but I'm going to do a journeyman job—I'm not going to embarrass anybody—because I have some intelligence and I know how to go to a library. If I have to build a room, I can figure out how to hang sheetrock, how to tape, how to plaster—I'm going to do a decent job."

An ardent admirer and dear friend, Edwin G. Wilson was instrumental in bringing Angelou to Wake Forest.

confrontation of the old cage was the next necessary step in a life that is about "survival with grace and faith."

On her first evening at Wake Forest, she was disarmed by a mixed group of black and white students, seemingly eager to talk to her and one another about the issues that divided them. She recognized their need to develop a language for honest exchange, and seems to have based her brilliantly intuitive teaching on that perception.

Her teaching, Socratic in method, galvanizes students into thoughts and revelations that amaze her and themselves. Diedra Jones, a first-year law student, remembers studying charismatic leaders with Ms. Angelou as the highlight of her Wake Forest undergraduate experience. As the course began with introductions, students beguiled into trust revealed aspects of their inner lives to one another and achieved a tearful bonding.

Asked how that was possible, Jones said, "I don't know. She is so in touch with people, so able to focus in on what makes us all unique—we knew she loved us all." The class considered Martin Luther King, but students chose their own models to study as well—figures as disparate as Nat Turner and Mother Teresa. Throughout the course, Ms. Angelou kept returning the students to the figures they had chosen, deepening the experience of each.
As a great novel opened at random will yield a paragraph suggestive of the entire work, so a moment in her life resonates with the history of her developing consciousness.

A deepened awareness is what Ms. Angelou’s teaching is about. Her writing, her teaching, and her living are a single whole as she tells: “Try to make your friends those who can teach you and those whom you can teach. Try. If some people have nothing to give you at all, you may still want to give to them but not to pull them to your heart, because, sooner or later, if they can’t give you anything, they’ll begin to resent it.” She herself learns from her students, and they adore her.

She goes on, quiet and emphatic: “A serious writer may have five or six topics, but he or she has only one theme. One may teach the scherzos of Chopin, how they reflected the folk music of Poland or something, but the truth is one is teaching the stretching toward excellence—one is not only capable of excellence, but one is responsible for excellence—an awareness that it exists and you can learn toward it, aspire to it. So if I’m teaching East Indian nose flute or German jokes, you know, really at heart I’m teaching my thesis that human beings are more alike than we are unalike, and everything we do shows us that—everything. Whether one is looking at the people of Malta and those incredible garden terraces—incredible to know that in areas where the earth has been so overused by a populace, the people have had to take baskets and go to the sides of the river to get silt, rich silt, and bring it back miles to sprinkle it over the terraces so they can grow vegetables that will go into the ground only an inch, do you see? That’s happened in Malta. It’s also happened in China. One sees it in certain areas of Britain; in Africa. So human beings show their ingenuity, their persistence, and their need to survive. And their need for beauty, because it is lovely to see them.”

The motion of her speech makes an image of her pattern of thought, of life. Reflecting, moving from the impersonal “one” to the immediate “you” and “I” as her subject absorbs her, synthesizing wide experience as she talks, Ms. Angelou blends naturally the friendship, the teaching, and the writing as though they are all part of the same process—which, of course, they are in a same world—and equates excellence with deeper participation in humanity.

Dean Tom Mullen told Angelou that if it was her wish, “we will make a room for you here at Wake Forest.”

black vernacular. “Well, I wanted to show how these two men reached into their people’s mouths,” she says, demonstrating with her hand, “and got their most common speech to show their genius and beauty and their humor—their bathos, if you will, as well as pathos—just reached in and got it and said, ‘Here, this is how human beings sound. Look at this. See?’”

The course won Ms. Angelou the recognition of the Robert Burns Society, which invited her to become the principal speaker at their meeting in Scotland, held unfortunately on January 19, the day before the inauguration. More significant to the students, they learn the poems for dramatic recitation, learn them so “they’re in there, behind the knee-cap,” and take with them a sense of poetry as their own natural speech, a power.

For the theater department, Ms. Angelou produced Macbeth with two casts to play on alternate nights, one composed of female students, the other males except for Lady Macbeth, played by a female friend from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. Ms. Angelou directed the men to be soft, sensual, and emotive, everything moving in interlocking circles—the witches whirling in hoops—while the women’s movements were angular and remote. They were “tough, principled, pointed,” as we imagine men to be. “I just wanted to say to young men and
women—these are supposed to be attributes or attitudes or postures of women. Look, men do that. These are supposed to be attitudes of men, but women do that. If you are human and you have any balance in your life, you have some of all of that."

"Balance" is a dancer’s necessity—the gift of one who knows where the still center is even as she moves. Appearing settled for the moment at Wake Forest, the name she has chosen trailing her thirty or more honorary doctorates, Ms. Angelou may find here a balance between the longed for haven and the motion that has been the informing principle in her life. Her writing, her teaching, her enormous extended family, her church are hers wherever she is, and her home lives within her.

In the incident that opens her autobiography, she recites an Easter poem to the congregation of her church. She later recognizes one line, "I have not come to stay," as the expression of an attitude, a shield she used against rejection. Dolly McPherson finds the line prophetic of Angelou’s dynamic pattern of "renewal, rebirth, change in consciousness, and...recovered innocence." It is emblematic as well of the deepest wisdom. Not one of us comes to stay, but few live as though they know that truth. Possessing it, Ms. Angelou possesses the simplicity and natural graciousness of a great spirit, evident even in little things. An example: a seventeen-year-old student who accompanied me to our interview wanted Ms. Angelou’s signature but had brought nothing for her to sign. When I donated my copy of All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes for the excellent cause, Ms. Angelou took it and wrote in a strong, legible script: "Nikkia Rowe, Joy! from Brooke Pacy and Maya Angelou Jan ’93."

She has brought herself from a “maelstrom of rootlessness” to vital, focused transcendence by living fully, an integrated person, her sensuality neither separate from nor judged by her intellect. Her rich, deep-hued synthesis of crises has moved her forward and inward. She doesn’t fly over the territory; she travels through it, equipping herself to speak profoundly of humanity to humanity.

One of E. M. Forster’s heroes discovers while traveling that, although social barriers do exist, they aren’t very high and are easily jumped. That is so, if one is as buoyant and resourceful as Maya Angelou. Lately, "Black" and "White" are giving way in her writing to more accurate and less political observations of plum, coffee bean, eggplant, peach, apricot, cream. Perhaps she can teach us all to forgive history. She says, “We have it in us to be splendid!” In her presence, magnanimity seems inevitable. It seems possible that we can, for the tiny mote of time that we call this planet ours, “have the grace to look up and out/ and into your sister’s eyes, into/ your brother’s face, your country” and greet them with her simplicity—if we can summon her courage.

Brooke Pacy is a freelance writer and English teacher living in Baltimore.

“Fat or skinny, gay or straight,” everyone is welcome at Angelou’s generous table, says Willie Pearson.

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