

Maya Angelou and the art of the outcast

by [Yolanda Pierce](#)

June 4, 2014

To fully celebrate the life and legacy of Maya Angelou (April 4, 1928–May 28, 2014), we must contextualize her 86 years of living within the black religious traditions that influenced her and birthed her deep spirituality. While countless scholars have analyzed her literary, political, and cultural contributions, few have situated her work within the scope of black religious life, particularly the African-American Christian tradition. In her literary language, political activism, and multiple artistic endeavors, Maya Angelou engaged and challenged the religious traditions into which she was born, serving as a prophetic voice for her generation and the ones that followed.

In a [1992 interview](#), Angelou stated that religion had always been an important force in her life:

I have always tried to find myself a church. I have studied everything. I spent some time with Zen Buddhism and Judaism and I spent some time with Islam. I am a religious person. It is in my spirit, but I found that I really want to be a Christian. That is what my spirit seems to be built on. I just know that I find the teachings of Christ so accessible. I really believe that Christ made a sacrifice and for those reasons I want to be a Christian.

While Angelou engaged the world's religions, she found meaning and comfort in the Christianity she learned as a child growing up in Stamps, Arkansas.

Her deep spiritual sensibility can be seen in the rhetoric which infused her poetry and other writings. In her books, including *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well*, and *I Shall Not Be Moved*, we see the profound influence of African-American spirituals, along with biblical imagery. Angelou was often known to burst forth into a hymn or spiritual, and her strong voice would sing such powerful lines as "I think I'll run on and see what's the end's gonna to be." Angelou [said](#):

I find in my poetry and prose the rhythms and imagery of the best—when I'm at my best—of the good Southern black preachers. The lyricism of the spirituals and the directness of gospel songs and the mystery of blues are in my music, are in my poetry and prose, or I've missed everything.

For Angelou, like the other members of her generation, the words of the King James Bible, the power of the Negro Spirituals, and the sermonic tradition of the African-American church were the vernacular language and soundtrack of black life.

But it is not only within her writing that we can locate religion's influence on Angelou. Her Christian faith also fueled her social justice work, such as being a coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and her lifetime devotion to anti-racism. She embraced Malcolm X, she walked with Martin Luther King Jr., she helped to found the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage. And she did all of this as a warrior for peace and justice, never ashamed to call upon the name of God. Angelou was not afraid to critique oppressive elements within various religious traditions yet she did not hesitate to draw strength from her Christian faith for the causes to which she devoted her life.

Perhaps the spiritual virtue Angelou held most dear was a powerful celebration of knowing and loving the self. Her most notable work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, depicts the difficulty of growing up as a young black girl in a world that neither loves nor values black girls. Her autobiographies and poetry urge black women to love themselves and to love the God that is present within them; this call to self-love and self-care is a radical act of agency and liberation. When Angelou unapologetically calls black women “phenomenal,” she disrupts those forces that attempt to rob black women of an identity of also being made in the image and likeness of God.

For most of Angelou's early life, she existed among the “least of these,” at the very margins of society. She grew up in poverty, she survived rape and sexual abuse, and she was mute for five years as a result of ongoing molestation. Her late teens and early twenties brought more hardships as she tried to make a living and raise a child while having little education or training, in a country that could and did legally discriminate against her. But from these bitter waters, Angelou would rise and thrive.

Her life story provokes a question: what powerful art, poetry, music, literature, and political activism are we missing when we ignore the discarded and the outcast? Angelou the former sex worker, teen mother, and stripper is the same Angelou who dined with presidents, taught at the nation's most prestigious schools, and received this country's highest honors and accolades. We do not have to sanitize her story because it is one of strength, honor, and dignity. We honor Angelou's legacy by listening to and loving those we far too often ignore and silence. May her prophetic voice be heard for many more generations to come.

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