



**CLAIMING THE SKY WITH MAYA:  
BREAKING OUT OF CAGES AND RISING**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

In her eulogy to the beloved and distinguished actor, playwright and activist Ossie Davis, Maya Angelou tells us that “when great trees fall, rocks on distant hills shudder” and we are shocked into temporary loss of voice and clarity of mind. But “then our memory comes to us again in the form of a spirit, and it is the spirit of our beloved”. And “we see our beloved standing before us as a light, as a beacon, indeed, as a way”. And so it is with our beloved Dr. Maya Angelou who, in life and now in transition and ascension, stands as a beautiful light before us, an opener-of-the-ways and a righteous way in the tradition of our ancestors. Surely, she has risen in radiance in the heavens and now sits in the sacred circle of the ancestors, among the doers of good, the righteous and the rightfully rewarded.

As Maya stands before us as a light, a beacon and a way, she points us towards a constant strengthening, striving and struggling, so characteristic of her and her people. It is a way of finding fire in the midst of water, water in the midst of rock, and a steady rock on which to stand in the midst of a world of raging waters and shifting sands. Indeed, it is a central and continuing theme, principle and practice in Maya’s life and literature, i.e., to refuse to be reduced to one’s circumstances or wilfully limited in life by obstacles or events and instead to break out of all cages, rise in freedom, take flight like a bird and “dare claim the sky”. Indeed, she says, “You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced to them”. And this too, “We might encounter defeats, but we must never be defeated”.

In her signature work “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” she opens up a way to become and be our best selves, ever striving and struggling onward and upward. For her and the great African American poet, Paul Laurence Dunbar, from whom she borrows the metaphor of the caged bird seeking and singing freedom, it is a living portrait of the African American people, creating spaces of beauty, meaning and freedom, even in the midst of oppression and striving and struggling to do this in countless personal and collective ways. Here Maya shows us the way to appreciate our history and culture as a unique and equally valuable and valid way to be human in the world. She says she studied and wrote about her life and the life of her people in order to learn about human beings.

Maya had realized early the rich sources of life lessons, creativity and insights of endless kinds in African culture. And so she reached back before going forward (*sankofa*), as she asked us to do in her eulogy for Ossie—to reach back, remember, recover and resolve to become ever better by the instructive examples and uplifting spirit of those before us. In his poem, “Sympathy” written in 1899, Dunbar teaches agency and freedom, sacrifice and striving, even caged in a context of savage and sustained oppression. In her poem, written in 1969, Maya revisits this caged bird metaphor and theme, and speaks of “a free bird” who “leaps on the back of the wind”; “dares to claim the sky”; “sings freedom” and “names the sky his own”. And she becomes this bird, freeing herself, riding the wind, singing freedom songs and daring to claim the sky and name it her own.

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Maya, in her seeking and singing freedom, was an activist artist in the tradition of Paul Robeson, Harry Belafonte, Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, and others, embracing Robeson's assertion "that the battlefield is everywhere, there is no sheltered rear". Thus, Maya was involved in the Black Freedom Movement, the African Liberation Movements, the anti-apartheid movement, the struggle for human rights and prisoners' rights, and for peace and justice in the world. As she told her friend and fellow freedom fighter Coretta Scott King, "I do believe that peace and justice should belong to every person, everywhere all the time".

In addition to all else said, I appreciated her support of Malcolm and his initiatives to build the Organization of African American Unity in difficult and dangerous times. She said of him, "Up close he was a great red arch through which one could pass through eternity...I had never been so affected by a human presence". And he called her friend and fellow freedom fighter, saying "You are a beautiful writer and a beautiful woman", in the most expansive sense of the words. Also, I appreciated the friendship and mutual support between her and James Baldwin, and the rich and instructive narratives that were passed down and around about them. And I respected and appreciated her for sending a letter in support of my release from political imprisonment in the early 1970s. It was/is an example of the many and wide range of political activities and acts of goodness she engaged in without fanfare, need for recognition or to be thanked.

Of course, Tiamoyo and I got the opportunity to thank her in person, when we

met her in the mid-80s as fellow members of the National African American Leadership Family, chaired by Dr. Barbara Williams-Skinner and founded with Dr. Tom Skinner, Arthur Ashe, Dr. Dorothy Height, Bill and C. Delores Tucker, Dick Gregory, Coretta Scott King, Alexis Herman, LeBaron Taylor and others.

Over the years, it was a great joy to talk with her in an informal context. And in fact, she hosted the Family at her home with all the luxuriousness and love she is legendarily known for. Moreover, we also remember and respect Maya as poet and honored presence at the Million Man March, in which the Leadership Family members played a central role in organizing and programming.

Others have written so much else of all she has done as a truly Imhotepian, multidimensional woman, i.e., as author, activist and intellectual; poet, professor, producer and playwright; singer, dancer, director, composer and filmmaker. And because of this and so much more, we remember and appreciate her also as she defined herself: "a phenomenal woman," who could seriously say "I created myself"; one who regardless of restraints and restrictions still rose; one who was "grateful to have been loved and to be loved now, and to be able to love, because love liberates"; one who was taught "when you get, you give; when you learn, you teach"; and one who declared with uncompromising conviction that "each of us comes from the Creator trailing wisps of glory", and you should "listen to yourself and in that quietude, you might hear the voice of God".