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OPINION

Phenomenal Woman of Immeasurable Impact

Maya Angelou was a prophet of our times

BY THE REV. M. LINDA JARAMILLO

The passing of Maya Angelou, a powerful prophet, has left a hole in our hearts and pain in our souls.

During the past few days, we have heard powerful stories describing the immeasurable impact that Maya Angelou had on the lives of millions around the world. Those who knew Dr. Angelou share beautiful accounts of their experiences with her as



a teacher, a mentor, a friend, and a wise elder.

I never met this "Phenomenal Woman" in person, but I still weep at her passing, knowing that we will miss her prophetic female voice in our cultural landscape.

Her life journey in the Jim Crow South was filled with the disruptions of racism, sexism, and family violence. It is a testament to the power of the human spirit to survive and to thrive.

Her childhood experience of sexual abuse at the hands of a "loved one" can only be described as a profound tragedy. Yet Maya Angelou's story is one of resilience. Through her

prophetic words, Dr. Angelou opened our eyes and called out the social systems, which allow for such abuse to occur in the first place.

In these chaotic times we often lament the need for more prophets like Dr. King and Mahatma Gandhi to guide our path. I submit that we have also been honored and blessed by the powerful prophet, Dr. Maya Angelou.

She is one who will stand tall in the eyes of millions of women who yearn for a voice of courage and hope in the midst of the overwhelming violence that is being waged against women and girls all over the world.

Dr. Angelou often shared that courage is the most important

virtue because without it, nothing else can be experienced consistently. Indeed, she demonstrated such courage in her teaching, her writing, and her living.

She knew what it meant to be a person of dignity, which she claimed was the very basis for being a representative of the human race.

In an interview with Melissa Harris-Perry just two years ago, responding to a question about the incivility and disrespect demonstrated by candidates in the recent elections, Dr. Angelou asked, "What would our nation be like if we dared to be intelligent and allowed our intelligence to dic-

tate our actions?"

At the closing of her interview Dr. Angelou said this, "I write and I speak because I have something to say. I pray that whatever I have to say will encourage the coming of what you call the millennium. Then we really will have enough courage to be courageous."

Dr. Angelou, we are listening and we salute you as a "Phenomenal Woman" who we claim as a prophet of our times. You have and will influence women and men for many generations to come. Rest in peace.

Rev. M. Linda Jaramillo is executive minister of Justice and Witness Ministries at the United Church of Christ.

Dr. Maya Angelou: I Rise, We Rise, She Rises

Continuing a legacy of love and vision

BY MARC H. MORIAL

In the week since her passing, there have been many tributes to the remarkable life of Dr. Maya Angelou. President Obama called her "one of the brightest lights of our time." Former President Clinton described her as "a national treasure and a beloved friend." Oprah Winfrey said, "She will always be the rainbow in my clouds."

But it is virtually impossible to sum up in words the many dimensions, the many gifts and the many lives touched by a woman who reigned in regality as the Queen Mother. As I said in my own tribute on the day of her passing, "Dr. Maya Angelou defies any single description. She defined the essence of a 'Phenomenal Woman' for us."

Maya Angelou is best known to millions as a prolific poet and author. Her first (of six) autobiographies, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," inspired the legendary James Baldwin to write, "I have no words for this achievement, but I know that not since the days of my childhood, when the people in books were more real than the people one



saw every day, have I found myself so moved."

As an author of numerous works of poetry and prose, Dr. Angelou continued until the hour of her passing to move us with her words and in so many other ways — as a singer, dancer, actor, activist, teacher, sage and much more.

It is widely known that she did not speak for several years following a tragic childhood rape that resulted in the murder of her rapist. But, instead of remaining closed and silent, Dr. Angelou spread her wings, found her voice and soared into the hearts, minds and souls of millions of people around the world.

In a lifetime arising out of hard times, there was almost

nothing she couldn't do or didn't try.

Her official website, mayaangelou.com, recounts that, "As a young single mother, she supported her son by working as a waitress and cook..." In the 1940s, she became the first black woman streetcar conductor in San Francisco. She even once worked as an auto body shop paint remover. She was also an accomplished dancer and singer. She has written a Pulitzer Prize nominated screenplay, "Georgia, Georgia," and was nominated for a 1973 Tony Award for her Broadway performance in "Look Away." She has danced with Alvin Ailey, toured Europe in "Porgy and Bess" and made numerous appearances in films and on TV.

Dr. Maya Angelou was a modern day Renaissance woman who lived her own philosophy, "Pursue the things you love doing and do them so well that people can't take their eyes off you."

Maya Angelou was also a committed civil rights activist. She was a friend and confidante of Malcolm X. She once served as coordinator of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Since 1982, she served as Reynolds Professor of American Studies at Wake Forest University. As her son, Guy Johnson, described her, she was "a warrior for equality, tolerance and peace."

The National Urban League will forever be grateful for her

spell-binding appearance at our 100th anniversary celebration in 2010, where she delivered an original commemorative poem entitled "We Hear You." Like us, the world could not help but hear the powerful words and wisdom of Dr. Angelou.

She left us with a final wish. On May 23, five days before her death, she tweeted, "Listen to yourself and in that quietude you might hear the voice of God."

We will miss her incredible creative and generous spirit. But the love and vision of Dr. Maya Angelou will continue to rise. It is up to all of us to make sure that we continue to rise with her.

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