

THE MOOSE IS LOOSE Northern Sweden looks so pristine ... from atop a 148-foot tree-chomper

SCARLET AND GRAY Columbus is more than just Buckeye country

AMERICAN AIRLINES - AMERICAN EAGLE

AMERICANWAY

NOVEMBER 15, 2008

A photograph of Maya Angelou sitting in a red armchair. She is wearing a dark, sequined top and a dark skirt. She is smiling and looking towards the right. Her left hand is resting on the chair's arm, and she is wearing a gold watch and a ring. The background shows a window with light-colored curtains.

AMERICAN TREASURE

Maya Angelou knows the true meaning of Thanksgiving



Giving Thanks

*Celebrated author and poet Maya Angelou
looks back on 80 years of blessings. By Dawn
Reiss. Photographs by Beth Perkins.*



"I'm grateful for being here, for being able to think, for being able to see, for being able to taste, for appreciating love — for knowing that it exists in a world so rife with vulgarity, with brutality and violence, and yet love exists. I'm grateful to know that it exists."

"Would you like some water?" Dr. Maya Angelou asks as she welcomes me into her New York City home. "Or the world's greatest apple juice?"

Though time has slowed Angelou, who turned 80 in April, her kind eyes and robust laugh reflect a woman much younger in spirit, and her words reveal an intellect and a wit sharper than ever.

"Unbutton your jacket and be comfortable," she says as I join her at her dining room table. She raises her glass of Martinelli's apple juice and clinks it against mine. "Cheers," she says. Somehow, Angelou manages to simultaneously be warm and approachable yet dignified and almost noble in her presence. She is American royalty, and this is her palace.

It's one of two palaces, actually. Lovely as it is — the walls adorned with beautiful African artwork — this brownstone in Harlem is not her primary residence. She spends most of her time at her home in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. But this week, Angelou is in New York for a signing of her latest book, *Letter to My Daughter*, a collection of reflections and life lessons for the thousands of women she considers her daughters, though she never gave birth to one. It's her 30th book; but, to be honest, she says, she's started to lose count over the years. After eight decades of triumphs and tragedies, Angelou has learned that happiness is not found in counting how much you have, be it books or accolades or wealth or friends, but by appreciating however much — or little — you've been given.

"I'm grateful," she says, sipping her juice. "I am truly grateful. I'm grateful for being here, for being able to think, for being able to see, for being able to taste, for appreci-

ating love — for knowing that it exists in a world so rife with vulgarity, with brutality and violence, and yet love exists. I'm grateful to know that it exists. And I'm grateful to know it exists in me, and I'm able to share it with so many people."

Angelou's feelings of appreciation are part of the reason that Thanksgiving is one of her favorite times of the year. Her most prized possessions are her family members and friends, of which she has many, and Thanksgiving affords her time to spend on nothing but them. This month, as she's done for many Novembers, she'll host between 200 and 250 of her "beloveds" at her home in North Carolina (Oprah Winfrey has been a guest in the past), where they'll take part in an elaborate Thanksgiving celebration. The festivities will go on for four days — just long enough for Angelou to properly give thanks for each and every one of her blessings.

Of course, blessings weren't always as apparent or as plentiful in her past as they are now. Angelou's tumultuous life has been, quite literally, an open book, as she has documented her early struggles in six different autobiographies. Marguerite Ann "Maya" Johnson was born in St. Louis, Missouri, in 1928. Her parents divorced when she was three, and her mother sent her and her older brother, Bailey, to the rural, segregated town of Stamps, Arkansas, to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, whom they adoringly called "Momma."

Angelou and her brother would eventually return to St. Louis, where — as Angelou detailed in her first and still most famous work to date, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* — she endured several traumatic experiences and remained mute for years after as a result. Angelou was then sent back to Stamps to live with her wise and strong-willed grandmother, who taught her a great deal about life.

"You know how they say you only have so many teachable moments?" Angelou asks with a laugh. "Well, my grandmother caught me at every one."

One of the most important — and most frequent — lessons Henderson taught her granddaughter was to not be a complainer. As the only African-American store owner in Stamps, Henderson endured her share



of hardships but never allowed herself to gripe. She would use bellyaching customers as examples for her grandchildren.

"She'd say, 'There are people all over the world, black and white, rich and poor, who went to sleep when that person went to sleep, and they have never awakened. ... They would give anything for five minutes of what that person was complaining about,'" Angelou recalls. "She said that to me so much." And her grandmother's message has stuck with her to this day. "You have to know me very, very well to hear me complain," she says. "I'll protest like the dickens, but I don't complain."

*"No matter how bad it gets,
I'm always grateful to
know that I don't have to
stay with the negative."*

School was another bright spot for young Angelou. She credits one of her teachers, Bertha Flowers, with breaking her six-year silence by encouraging her to read the works of classic writers aloud. It was then that, as Angelou once wrote, she "met and fell in love with William Shakespeare."

The rest of Angelou's upbringing — that which occurred outside of school or the security of Henderson's shop — left a very different kind of indelible impression on her. When Angelou was 13, she moved yet again — this time, to San Francisco, where her mother had relocated. Two years later, she went to live with her father, where she had a violent run-in with her father's girlfriend. Angelou then turned to the streets and was homeless for a summer. She became a single mother at the age of 17, when she gave birth to her only child, a son named Guy — whom she considers her biggest blessing of all.

Despite her troubles, Angelou finished high school. She took jobs as a calypso singer and an exotic dancer in order to make

ends meet and provide for her son. Always a lover of the stage, she got the chance to join a touring production of the George Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess* in 1954. When the show traveled to Europe, she was forced to leave her then-eight-year-old son with her mother. Several months passed, and Angelou was so consumed with guilt over abandoning her son that she left the production early and returned home. That's when she suffered a breakdown.

She visited a psychiatrist, whom she describes as a "young white man in a Brooks Brothers suit, a button-down shirt, and a tie." She felt she couldn't relate to the doctor

and left, distraught. "I looked at him and thought, How could I explain to you what it's like to be a black woman with a son — a black boy — trying to raise him in a racist country?"

Luckily, her vocal coach, Fred Wilkerson, was there to catch her at another teachable moment and remind her of a lesson her grandmother had taught her years before. When Angelou showed up at his doorstep, angry and overwhelmed, he simply handed her a pad of paper and a pen. He instructed her to write down all the blessings in her life. Though she resisted at first, she realized after finishing a page of notes that she had much more to be thankful for than she'd originally acknowledged.

"In the midst of hard times, you have to say, 'I know this will not last forever.' No matter how bad it gets, I'm always grateful to know that I don't have to stay with the negative. I don't have to continue in this climate of cynicism. I may not see the light at the end of the tunnel, but I know there is

one," Angelou says.

Eventually, she reached the end of the long, twisting tunnel, but not before collecting enough life experiences to fill a half dozen memoirs. She became a passionate civil rights activist and worked for — and befriended — both Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. She did stints as a journalist and a teacher overseas, spending time in Ghana and Egypt. She studied filmmaking in Sweden and later became the first African-American woman to have a screenplay produced (1972's *Georgia, Georgia*). And she fell in and out of love with many men as she went, even marrying a few of them. Just how many times she's walked down the aisle, though, is one of those numbers she prefers not to count.

Angelou has a multitude of other accomplishments that she's too humble to enumerate: She's won three spoken-word Grammys and a National Book Award and has been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, an Emmy, and a Tony. She's written songs for musicians such as B.B. King and Clint Black, and she recited an original poem, "On the Pulse of Morning," at President Bill Clinton's inauguration in 1993. She is fluent in six languages, has earned more than 50 honorary degrees, and was granted the first lifetime Reynolds Professorship of American Studies at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem. The professorship is an honor she holds particularly dear, as she considers herself first and foremost not a poet, an author, or a playwright but a teacher. This calling goes back to yet another of her grandmother's lessons: "When you get, give," Henderson instructed her. "When you learn, teach."

There's also Angelou's considerable feat of writing those 30 books, which have earned her a legion of fans. Today, in addition to hosting a weekly radio show on Sirius XM Satellite Radio's Oprah & Friends channel, the octogenarian is hard at work on her next two books, one of which is a counterpart to *Letter to My Daughter* that will be titled *Letter to My Son*.

This month, however, she'll put her work aside as she celebrates Thanksgiving with the blessings in her life. Her excitement is obvious as she describes the traditions of their yearly gatherings. Wednesday night, the group congregates at her friend's home for cocktails and hors d'oeuvres. Thursday,

MASTERING
THE ART OF
USDA PRIME STEAKS.



1.	JACKSON'S STEAKHOUSE		FT. LAUDERDALE, FL	954.522.4450
2.	<i>America's Best</i> DONOVAN'S <small>(STEAK & CHOP HOUSE)</small>		SAN DIEGO (DOWNTOWN) LA JOLLA/UTC PHOENIX, AZ	619.237.9700 858.450.6666 602.955.3666
3.	Bob's <i>Steak & Chop House</i> <small>Established 1993</small>		DALLAS, TX GRAPEVINE, TX SAN FRANCISCO, CA PLANO, TX	214.528.9446 817.481.5555 415.273.3085 972.608.2627
4.	RINGSIDE STEAKHOUSE <small>Best Steaks in Town Since 1941!</small>		PORTLAND, OR PORTLAND, OR	503.223.1513 503.255.0750
5.	Charley's STEAK HOUSE		ORLANDO, FL INT'L DRIVE, FL KISSIMMEE, FL TAMPA, FL	407.851.7130 407.363.0228 407.396.6055 813.353.9706
6. (tie)	PRIME CHOP HOUSE <small>CHOP STEAKS & SEAFOOD</small>		PALM SPRINGS, CA PALM DESERT, CA	760.320.4500 760.779.9888
6. (tie)	SPENCER'S <small>FOR STEAKS AND CHOPS</small>		SALT LAKE CITY, UT SPOKANE, WA SAN JOSE, CA	801.238.4748 509.744.2372 408.437.2170
7.	MO'S <small>A Place for Steaks</small>		MILWAUKEE, WI INDIANAPOLIS, IN	414.272.0720 317.624.0720
8.	NEW YORK PRIME <small>A STEAKHOUSE</small>		ATLANTA, GA MYRTLE BEACH, SC	404.846.0644 843.448.8081
9. (tie)	POLOGRILL		TULSA, OK	918.744.4280
9. (tie)	BOHANNAN'S <small>PRIME STEAKS & SEAFOOD</small> <small>SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS</small>		SAN ANTONIO, TX	210.472.2600
10.	HYDE PARK <small>PRIME STEAKHOUSE</small>		CLEVELAND, OH COLUMBUS, OH PITTSBURGH, PA	216.344.2444 614.224.2204 412.222.4014

www.primesteakhouses.com

Distinguished Restaurants of North America
www.DiRoNA.com

Wine Spectator Best of Award of Excellence

Wine Spectator Award of Excellence

Send Comments to: Prime Time Top 10, 4369 D'Evereux Circle, Pensacola, FL 32504

MAYA ANGELOU

she says, is "the only nonoptional day, because we have dinner." On Friday, guests get to explore the city and attend a barbecue hosted by another of Angelou's close friends. And on Saturday, Angelou and some author friends go to nearby bookstores to do signings. The celebration's grand finale comes that evening, during what Angelou calls the "family presentation" — a talent show of sorts.

"People who can sing, do," she says. "Those who can't sing do too. People dance. People tell stories to entertain each other.

"I've never allowed a television camera in," she adds. "Some people are very famous, and some are not."

Though Angelou says she rarely does more than tell a joke at the presentations — "I have so many years on everyone," she reasons — she merrily regales me with story after story of her guests' performances over the years. She tells of one year when her relative, photographer Margaret Courtney-Clarke, brought accomplished Italian musician Alessandro Alessandrini to the festivities. "He told the group, 'I didn't bring my guitar, but I can whistle,'" Angelou recalls. "It turned out that he's a composer and performer of whistling music in the Spaghetti Westerns, like *For a Few Dollars More*. It was just fantastic." Another year, two friends — one black, one white — who both came from Vaudevillian backgrounds performed a routine together.

"Our people are all sorts: We are black and white, Asian and Spanish-speaking, young and old," she says. "We are able to look past complexion and see community. ... The truth is, we are more alike than we are unlike as human beings. We really pretty much all want the same things."

She reaches for her glass of apple juice again, the lines on her hands deep with experience, and she grows reflective. As she's looked back on her past this afternoon, she can't help but also think of the future, and to Thanksgivings when her grandchildren and their children will be enjoying their own traditions.

"I may be remembered as this tall, mean black lady, but I hope not," she says, smiling. "I hope I'll be remembered as kind and generous and funny and loving and brave."

And grateful. Always grateful. **AW**

DAWN REISS is a Chicago-based freelance writer.

NO PURCHASE NECESSARY. Void where prohibited. Open to legal residents of the 50 United States and the District of Columbia, 18 years or older. Participation is subject to complete Official Rules, available at www.aal.com/contests. Sweepstakes begins at 11:59 a.m. EDT on 10/27/2008 and ends at 11:59 a.m. EST on 12/31/2008. MasterCard and the MasterCard Brand Mark are registered trademarks of MasterCard International Incorporated. American Airlines and AA.com are registered trademarks of American Airlines, Inc. American Airlines is the sponsor of the American Airlines Travel Concierge Sweepstakes. © 2008 American Airlines, Inc. All rights reserved.