

# Why Maya Angelou Disliked Modesty

As I learned when I met her, the late author believed that true arrogance lay in denying one's own specialness—and denying the specialness of others.





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“You may now kiss my cheek,” said Maya Angelou. Her deep voice hung in the air, filling the large dining room inside of her Harlem home.

Stunned, I sat there for a minute. I had never been asked at the end of an interview to kiss someone else’s cheek.

It was October 2008 and I had flown to New York after haggling for months for an interview for an in-flight magazine cover story. Prior to the interview, a set of “communication courtesies” instructions for meeting Angelou were emailed to me, much like a list I imagine boarding schools send out to students for review before making an appearance.

It said:

#### **Greeting & Introductions**

Dr. Angelou will greet you by your last name. She will use your title and your last name in all communications. Dr. Angelou may ask you the origin of your name. You should greet her as Dr. or Mrs. Angelou. Please address her staff as Mr., Ms., or Mrs. - using their last name.

#### **Agenda**

Dr. Angelou would like to receive an agenda prior to the meeting.

#### **Meeting Dialogue**

Dr. Angelou will often pause prior to speaking or when completing her thought.

Please hold your thought until she is finishing speaking.

#### **Foreign Language**

Dr. Angelou speaks five different languages. She will enjoy speaking French, Spanish, Hebrew, Italian, or Fanti with you.

#### **Attire**

During formal business, meetings Dr. Angelou ask the men to wear a jacket and tie and women in appropriate business attire.

#### **Room Temperature**

Dr. Angelou requires warm rooms. You may choose to remove your jacket or loosen your tie if you find the room too warm.

#### **Arrival**

Dr. Angelou would like for participants in the same meeting to arrive together on time.

#### **Chair**

Dr. Angelou will sit in the chair at the end of the table to have access to her staff and phones.

#### **Food Allergy**

***Dr. Angelou is highly allergic to seafood. Please do not eat any seafood prior to meeting with her.***

Although I had interviewed other celebrities, this list was a first. I had no idea what to expect.

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"Do you want water," Angelou asked as we sat down at her dining-room table, "or the world's greatest apple juice?"

Of course, I choose apple juice.

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Maya Angelou's Universal Struggle

I had worn a formal black suit and was trying not to sweat in her balmy second home, where rich hues of apple and amber contrasted with the dark wood and large African paintings. Soon, Angelou admitted she was really a white-wine drinker who had five cases of chardonnay in her cellar. Before long, the previously "important" agenda was nowhere to be seen, and the formal rules relaxed.

Over the next few hours we talked about Angelou's early beginnings and later years, about womanhood and life in a prejudicial culture. Even with all the autobiographies, books of poetry, and essays she had

already written, and even with the pending publication of *Letter to My Daughter*, there was so much more advice she still wanted to give women.

"I wanted to talk more about courage, more about depending on one's own self," she told me. "Even in our own culture, women at times do not value themselves enough."

"It's about courage and showing respect," she said. "I respect myself and insist upon it from everybody. And because I do it, I then respect everybody too."

Too many times, she said, women are "lured into being disrespectful" and blame other women for being very fat or very skinny, or for making some bad choices.

"No," she said, her voice crescendoing from behind the oxygen mask she was wearing. "Each of us is phenomenal."

She went on, talking about how women are paid less than men to do the same job and still have to raise the children, keep the house going, and manage the family's finances, while still being sexy and getting physical enjoyment out of having sex.

"If we are smart, we go to church or synagogue or mosque," she continued. "If we are very smart we are still studying something. We are such knockouts. We are phenomenal."

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**"Modesty is a learned adaptation. It's stuck on like decals. As soon as life slams a modest person against the wall, that modesty will fall off faster than a G-string will fall off a stripper."**

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She never used the word "feminist," but she got the idea across: Yes, she was talking about race, but also, she was talking about how too few people champion the beliefs and causes of women.



“We understand that these prejudices, these walls have been built over centuries, and we must not be disheartened that we can’t knock them down in three months or four years,” she said. “We must understand we need some heavy artillery.”

Leaning in closer she said, “So we mustn’t run out of steam. Sometimes young women think ‘Dammnnn, I’ve been doing this nine years and I don’t think anything has budged.’ But keep plugging away. Nothing succeeds like success. Get a little success and then just get a little more.”

But be kind to yourself, she reminded me. At this point, it was more like a grandmother talking, trying to relay important knowledge.

“I don’t know what arrogance means,” she said. “You see, I have no patience with modesty. Modesty is a learned adaptation. It’s stuck on like decals. As soon as life slams a modest person against the wall, that modesty will fall off faster than a G-string will fall off a stripper.”

We both laughed.

“Whenever I’m around some who is modest, I think, ‘run like hell and all of fire,’” she said. “You don’t want modesty, you want humility. Humility comes from inside out. It says someone was here before me and I’m here because I’ve been paid for. I have something to do and I will do that because I’m paying for someone else who has yet to come.”

Hours passed, and we talked about heartache and friendship, Thanksgiving plans and her love of country music. When I thought the interview was done, Angelou informed me it was her time to ask me questions. She wanted to know my story. So I obliged.

We talked about my previous life as a collegiate rower and why I loved working as a reporter. She asked about my family, my upbringing. I told her how my parents have always volunteered and how we had just started helping a former *St. Petersburg Times* co-worker of mine care for his wife, Marian, who had a rare brain aneurysm. It’s called locked-in syndrome, where she is aware of her surroundings, but can longer speak.

Angelou offered to read the poem, “And Still I Rise” so I could play it for Marian in the hospital. Her rich voice filled the room, almost in a chant-like manner. I later played the recording for Marian, and it brought tears to her eyes.

At the end of talk, Angelou told me I could kiss her cheek. It is something that is reserved for only a few, she said.

And so I did.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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