

## Being Bodacious: Recreating Ourselves Daily

Clay Nelson © 22 May 2016

I'm a sucker for a good romantic movie. One of my all time favourites is *An Officer and a Gentleman*. It was here in 1982 I first heard the word "bodacious." One wannabe gentleman used it to describe particular body parts of a voluptuous woman attractive to nursing infants. Seven years later the word made a revival in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*. Bill tells Ted at the end of their adventure, "You and I have witnessed many things, but nothing as bodacious as what just happened."

While it has always been considered slang, it is not new slang. Its use can be dated back to 1837. Still, I can't say that it has yet made it into my daily lexicon, in spite of how much fun it is to say. Bo-da-cious! What inspired its use in this sermon was a quote that captured me by poet Maya Angelou, "We need the courage to create ourselves daily, to be bodacious enough to create ourselves daily — as Christians, as Jews, as Muslims, as thinking, caring, laughing, loving human beings. I think that the courage to confront evil and turn it by dint of will into something applicable to the development of our evolution, individually and collectively, is exciting, honourable."

Because she was an African-American woman who grew up in the segregated South, "bodacious" was a part of her lexicon. Apparently American southerners brought it into being by blending the words bold and audacious. Since those who coined it were probably white southerners, they would have considered it bodacious of her to use it. In a different era, it could have gotten her lynched. Its connotation is to be empowered and have confidence and conviction to step out of line and live outside the box. In other words, "uppity." You're being bodacious when you follow your passion, try something new, speak your truth, live to the fullest, allow yourself to sing, dance, love and even fail in the process, share laughter, smiles and the love of being alive.

We live in a world that doesn't encourage being bodacious. It's too risky. We live in a time of precariousness. Jobs aren't secure. Even one of our basic needs, housing, isn't secure. We feel isolated and alone. It's us against the system, a system that wants to keep us in our place. A system that allows the Prime Minister to get away with saying living in a car or garage or shipping container is not who we are in New Zealand. Go to WINZ and get help, he says—as if the mother of three living in a car hasn't already been there. And if she went back, WINZ would put her up in a motel, if she is lucky, and then give her the bill to pay back. To those powerless in the system, being bodacious sounds like something available only to those with white, male privilege. Better to be one of the system's ducks all in a row than make a splash.

Maya Angelou begged to differ. While I had certainly had some familiarity with her poetry, I knew embarrassingly little about her life, so I began reading the first volume of her six-volume autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Not surprisingly, her prose poetically enveloped me in a world I could not possibly have experienced as a white male of a certain age and made me a part of it anyway. And yet her coming of age story transcends the particulars of her life to become a universal story of how to become bodacious. For we are not born bodacious, we become it. And if we get there, we don't get there unassisted. Becoming bodacious is a community activity.

Maya Angelou describes her coming of age as a precocious but insecure black girl in the American South during the 1930s and subsequently in California during the 1940s. Maya's parents divorce when she is only three years old and ship Maya and her older brother, Bailey, to live with their paternal grandmother, Annie Henderson, in rural Stamps, Arkansas. Annie, whom they call Momma, runs the only store in the black section of Stamps and becomes the central moral figure in Maya's childhood.

As young children, Maya and Bailey struggle with the pain of having been rejected and abandoned by their parents. Maya also finds herself tormented by the belief that she is an ugly child who will never measure up to genteel, white girls. Nor does she feel equal to other black children.

When Maya is eight, her father, of whom she has no memory, arrives in Stamps unexpectedly and takes her and Bailey to live with their mother, Vivian, in St. Louis, Missouri. Beautiful and alluring, Vivian lives a wild life working in gambling parlours. One morning Vivian's live-in boyfriend, Mr Freeman, sexually molests Maya, and he later rapes her. They go to court and afterward Mr Freeman is violently murdered, probably by some of the underground criminal associates of Maya's family.

In the aftermath of these events, Maya endures the guilt and shame of having been sexually abused. She also believes that she bears responsibility for Mr Freeman's death because she denied in court that he had molested her prior to the rape. Believing that she has become a mouthpiece for the devil, Maya stops speaking to everyone except Bailey.

To Maya's relief, she and Bailey return to Stamps to live with Momma. Momma manages to break through Maya's silence by introducing her to Mrs Bertha Flowers, a kind, educated woman who tells Maya to read works of literature out loud, giving her books of poetry that help her to regain her voice.

During these years in Stamps, Maya becomes aware of both the fragility and the strength of her community.

Maya endures several appalling incidents that teach her about the insidious nature of racism. At age ten, Maya takes a job working for a white woman who calls Maya "Mary" for her own convenience. Maya becomes enraged and retaliates by breaking the woman's treasured fine china. When Maya gets a rotten tooth, Momma takes her to the only dentist in Stamps, a white man who tells her he'd rather place his hand in a dog's mouth than in hers. The last straw comes when Bailey encounters a dead, rotting black man and witnesses a white man's satisfaction at seeing the body. Momma begins to fear for the children's well-being and saves money to bring them to Vivian, who now lives in California.

When Maya is thirteen, the family moves to live with Vivian in Los Angeles and then San Francisco, the first city where Maya feels at home. She spends one summer with her father in Los Angeles and has to put up with his cruel indifference and his hostile girlfriend, Dolores. After Dolores cuts her in a fight, Maya runs away and lives for a month with a group of homeless teenagers in a junkyard. She returns to San Francisco strong and self-assured. She confronts racist hiring policies in wartime San Francisco to become the first black streetcar conductor at age fifteen. At sixteen, she hides her pregnancy from her mother and stepfather for eight months and graduates from high school. The account ends as Maya begins to feel confident as a mother to her new-born son.

That is a lot to cram into seventeen years--a lot of abandonment, a lot of racism, a lot of misogyny, a lot of poverty, a lot of guilt, a lot of homelessness, a lot of cruelty...just a lot. It certainly could have crushed her, but there were those along the way who kept her going. Certainly her grandmother and her brother were key to giving support. And then there was Mrs Flowers, who enticed her to her home with cookies and lemonade with the goal of helping her find her voice again by having her read great literature aloud and memorise poetry. However, years later she gave her Uncle Willie a lot of credit and as an example of being bodacious. In an interview with Bill Moyers, she had this to say:

*I was sent to him when I was three from California and he and my grandmother owned the only black-owned store in the town. He was obliged to work in the store, but he was*

*severely crippled. So he needed me to help, and my brother. So at about four he started us to learn to read and write and do our times tables. In order to get me to do my times tables, he would take me behind my neck and stand me in front of a pot-bellied stove. And he would say, "Now, sister, do your sixes." I did my sixes. I did my sevens. Even now, after an evening of copious libation, I can be awakened at eleven o'clock at night and asked, "Will you do your elevenses?" I do my elevenses with alacrity.*

*A few years ago my uncle died, and I went to Little Rock and was met by Miss Daisy Bates. And she told me, "Girl, there's somebody who wants to meet you." And I said that I'd be glad to meet whoever.*

*She said, "Good looking man." And I said, "Indeed, yes, certainly." So that evening she brought a man over to the hotel.*

*He said, "I don't want to shake your hand. I want to hug you." And I agreed. He said, "You know, Willie has died in Stamps" Now Stamps is very near to Texas. And Little Rock, when I was growing up, was as exotic as Cairo, Egypt, Buda and Pest. This man knew where Stamps was, and my crippled uncle?*

*He said, "Because of your uncle Willie I am who I am today." He said, "In the '20s, I was the only child of a blind mother. Your uncle gave me a job in your store, made me love to learn, and taught me my times tables."*

*I asked him how did he do that and he said, "He used to grab me [by the neck]." He said, "I guess you want to know who I am today."*

*"Yes, sir."*

*He said, "I'm Bussick, vice-mayor of Little Rock, Arkansas." He went on to become the first black mayor of Little Rock, Arkansas.*

*He said, "When you get down to Stamps, look up" and he gave me the name of a lawyer. He said, "He's a good old boy. He will look after you properly."*

*I went down expecting a middle-aged black man, and a young white man leapt to his feet. He said, "Miss Angelou, I am just delighted to meet you. Why you don't understand. Mr Bussick called me today. Mr Bussick is the most powerful black man in the state of Arkansas, but more important than that, he's a noble man. Because of Mr Bussick, I am who I am today."*

*I said, "Let me sit down first."*

*He said, "I was an only child of a blind mother, and when I was eleven years old, Mr Bussick got hold of me and made me love to learn. And I'm now in the State Legislature."*

*That which lives after us. I look back at Uncle Willie: crippled, black, poor, unexposed to the worlds of great ideas, who left for our generation and generations to come a legacy so rich...*

Uncle Willie is not the only who left a legacy. The foreword to my edition of Maya Angelou's autobiography is by Oprah Winfrey. She writes, "I was fifteen years old when I discovered *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It was a revelation. I had been a voracious reader since the third grade, yet for the first time, here was a story that finally spoke to the heart of me. I was in awe. How could this author have the same life experiences, the same

feelings, longings, perceptions as a poor black girl from Mississippi—as me?

“I marvelled from the first pages:

‘What you looking at me for?  
I didn’t come to stay...  
I just come to tell you,  
It’s Easter Day.’

“I was that girl who had recited Easter pieces—and pieces of Christmas poems, too. I was that girl who loved to read. I was that girl raised by my Southern grandmother. I was that girl raped at nine, who muted the telling of it. I understood why Maya Angelou remained silent for years.

“I bonded with her every word. Each page revealed insights and feelings I had never been able to articulate. I thought, Here’s a woman who knows me, who understands. *I know Why the Caged Bird Sings* became my talisman. As a teenager, I tried convincing everyone I knew to read it. Its author was now my favourite author, someone I idolised from afar.

“I knew it was Providence when, more than ten years later, as a young reporter in Baltimore, I was given the opportunity to interview Maya Angelou. ‘I promise,’ I insisted, ‘I promise if you’ll just let me speak with you, I won’t take more than five minutes of your time.’ As good as my word, at 4 minutes, 58 seconds I told the cameraman, ‘Done.’ Which was when Maya Angelou turned her head, angled it to the side, and with a twinkle in her eye smiled at me and asked, ‘Who are you, girl?’

“First we became friendly, then we became sister friends. When she finally told me I was her daughter, I knew I had found home.

“Sitting at her kitchen table on Valley Road in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, listening to her read poetry, the poetry of my childhood—that was my favourite place to be: at the kitchen table. Soaking up all the knowledge, all the things she had to teach—the grace, the love, all of it—my heart was full when I was with her.

“She was always teaching. ‘When you learn, teach,’ she said frequently. ‘When you get, give.’ I was a devoted student, learning from her up to the moment of our very last conversation on the Sunday before she died. ‘I am a human being,’ she would always say, ‘therefore nothing human is alien to me.’

“Maya Angelou lived what she wrote. She understood that sharing her truth connected her to the greater human truths—of longing, abandonment, security, hope wonder, prejudice, mystery, and, finally, self discovery: the realisation of who you really are and the liberation that love brings.”

Oprah concludes, “She spoke proudly, bodaciously, and often: ‘We are more alike than we are unlike!’

“That truth is why we can all have empathy, why can all be stirred when the caged bird sings.”

With those words in mind let us be bodacious, bold and audacious together that we might become as we are intended to be: fully alive giving life. But remember it is not a one-time event. Being bodacious is a creative exercise practiced every day.