BILL MOYERS: A few years ago at a dinner in New York I met Maya Angelou. We had grown up in the South, only a hundred miles apart as the Greyhound bus goes, but worlds beyond worlds in the inner experiences that shape the childhood. I lived in the gentle and neighborly white world that opened generously to ambition and luck. She moved in the tight and hounded other world of the South, whose boundaries black children crossed only in their imagination, if at all, and even then at intolerable risk.

Yet Maya Angelou broke free. And when finally we met, at another time and far beyond those once immutable boundaries, we hardly stopped talking for hours—two strangers from the same but different place.

For three years I didn't see her again. But I heard of her accomplishments, read her books and continued to nourish the memory of that first encounter. On a recent trip to San Francisco I sought her out at her cottage in Berkeley, across the bay, to share with you the spirit and insights of this gifted and very human woman.

I'm Bill Moyers. (MUSIC)

Singer, teacher, dancer, poet, authoress, actress, editor, songwriter, playwright. Someone has said Maya Angelou's career has touched more bases than Henry Aaron. Yet all these categories fail to do justice to the scope of her life.

She was raised in Stamps, Arkansas, by her grandmother and came as a teenager to join her mother in San Francisco, where, by the way, she became the first black fare-collector on the Market Street Railway.

In the early 1950's she studied dancing with Pearl Primas in New York and later appeared as a singer in San Francisco's Purple Onion. She toured Europe and Africa with "Porgy and Bess," taught modern dance in Rome and Tel Aviv, played the female lead off-Broadway in "The Blacks," worked with Godfrey Cambridge on "Cabaret for Freedom," and spent a year helping to raise funds for Martin Luther King in the North.

She lived in Africa for three years, editing an English-language magazine in Cairo—she speaks six languages—and teaching music and drama in Ghana.

She came back to America to write, among several works, the screenplay for the film, "Georgia, Georgia," and two powerful books, a bestselling autobiography and a collection of poems, "Just Give Me A Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Die."

Black and women are both trying to get free of cliches and stereotypes. How does a person who is both black and female come to grips with a society that doesn't know who you are?

MAYA ANGELOU: Well, one works at it, certainly. Being free is as difficult and as perpetual—or rather fighting for one's freedom, struggling towards being free, is like struggling to be a poet or a good Christian or a good Jew or good Moslem or good Zen Buddhist. You work all day long and achieve some kind of level
of success by nightfall, go to sleep and wake up the next morning with the job still to be done. So you start all over again.

I don't know if the society doesn't know who I am. And I mean I a woman, I a black, I human. I don't know if I quite believe that. I think it knows and doesn't itself want to cope. And that is the society's problem, not mine.

MOYERS: What do you mean it doesn't want to cope?

ANGELOU: It doesn't want to deal with the human quality of me.

MOYERS: Stereotypes are easy....

ANGELOU: Exactly.

MOYERS: Categories are more manageable?

ANGELOU: Oh, yes, exactly. All you have to do is just put a label on somebody. And then you don't have to deal with the physical fact. You don't have to wonder if they are waiting for the Easter bunny or love Christmas, or, you know, love their parents and hate small kids and are fearful of dogs. If you say, oh, that's a junkie, that's a nigger, that's a kike, that's a Jew, that's a honkie, that's a---you just--that's the end of it.

MOYERS: Are black women still wearing these myths, these labels, these categories?

ANGELOU: Well, black women wear them only in white people's eyes, in the white society's eyes. You see, black women have been incredibly free to struggle for hundreds of years. And the story of the black woman is about the most noble story I know of mankind, in the history of man.

We came--we were brought here from societies which had matrilineal inheritance in West Africa, which--our matrilineal inheritance still obtains in West Africa. That is, children inherit from their mother's family, so that things stay in the mother's blood line.

But in Africa there is patrilineal control, so the father can decide whether he wants his children to go to school, who he wants them to marry, and things--really important things.

MOYERS: Uh, huh.

ANGELOU: Well, slavery obviously ruled out any chance of patrilineal control. But there was the matrilineal dominance, which went underground. And after slavery the black woman, until 1940, was the one in the family who was able to make a living, 'cause the black men couldn't get jobs. And like....

MOYERS: Yeah, and that--didn't that give rise to this image of matriarchial ogres, which I think is your term?

ANGELOU: I know. I know. It's just--and it's not fair. It's not the total picture. But it would be very valuable, I think, if the people who would use the pejorative, use matriarch a pejorative, would do some homework and see where it came from and why. The black woman at some point begins to believe her own publicity, you see? She's asked to be strong, so she's strong. And she sees how strong she is; she becomes a little bit stronger. And she becomes a bit larger than life.

The white woman, on the other hand, is--has agreed to being a victim. And
a woman named Beah Richards, a great poet and a great actress, wrote a poem, "The Black Woman Speaks to White Womanhood," in which she says that white women, who were brought here many times almost as much slaves as black women—you know, to marry....

MOYERS: Hm, hm.

ANGELOU: She says, "If they did appraise my teeth, they checked out your thigh and sold you to the highest bidder, the same as I." And yet—she goes on in her poem to say, "Yet you have settled down, and when you saw my children sold you gave no reproach, but for an added broach settled down in your pink slavery and thought that enduring my slavery or allowing it to happen would makes yours less." She says, "You never noticed that the bracelet you took was really a chain, and the necklace you accepted throttled your speech."

Now, there's a great difference in the white American woman and the black American woman.

MOYERS: Well, do you think that women's liberation is a white woman's fantasy?

ANGELOU: I—no, certainly not a fantasy.

MOYERS: Not a fantasy?

ANGELOU: A necessity.

MOYERS: A necessity.

ANGELOU: They definitely need it.

MOYERS: Does it say anything to black women?

ANGELOU: Very little, I am afraid. You see, white women have been made to feel in this society that they are superfluous. A white man can run his society.

MOYERS: Now, Maya, not superfluous in bed....

ANGELOU: No.

MOYERS: ....not superfluous in the home, not superfluous in....

ANGELOU: No. Excuse me, Bill, I didn't mean that. I mean to run his world. He can send his rockets to the moon and the little woman can sit at home. He can keep that camera rolling. And I love—seeing you bring in some women in the crew, it just made me love you more, because I really did that.

But generally, he makes the—the white American man makes the white American woman maybe not superfluous but just a little kind of decoration. Not really important to the turning around of the wheels of state.

Well, the black American woman has never been able to feel that way. No black American man at any time in our history in the United States has been able to feel that he didn't need that black woman right against him, shoulder to shoulder—in that cotton field, on the auction block, in the ghetto, wherever. That black woman is an integral if not most important part of the family unit. There is a kind of strength that is almost frightening in black women. It's as if a steel rod runs right through the head down to the feet. And I believe that we have to thank black women not only for keeping the black family alive but the
white family.

MOYERS: Why is that?

ANGELOU: Because black women have nursed a nation of strangers. For hundreds of years they literally nursed babies at their breasts who they knew when they grew up would rape their daughters and kill their sons.

MOYERS: That's....

ANGELOU: That's a fact.

MOYERS: That's strong.

ANGELOU: I know, but it's the truth, Bill. It's the truth.

MOYERS: You have done almost anything you wanted to. You have traveled a lot. You have tasted many languages and many life-styles. You have written, you have acted, you have sung. You have scored in movies. You've really been a mobile, nomadic, free person. What price have you paid for that freedom?

ANGELOU: Well, at some point--you only are free when you realize you belong no place--you belong every place--no place at all. The price is high. The reward is great. I feel that--I really have felt almost my life that I wouldn't live long. And now I'm doing a pretty good job, you know. But....

MOYERS: You've lived. Prophet--somebody said a prophet is a person whose predictions have been proven wrong long after they are forgotten. Maybe that self-prophecy will prove to be forgotten.

ANGELOU: I hope. Anyway, but....

MOYERS: Do you belong anywhere?

ANGELOU: I haven't yet.

MOYERS: Do you belong to anyone?

ANGELOU: More and more. I mean, I belong to myself. I'm very proud of that. I am very concerned about how I look at Maya. I like Maya very much. I like the humor and the courage very much. And when I find myself acting in a way that isn't--that doesn't please me, then I have to deal with that.

But--the first time I ever felt I belonged anyplace was in West Africa, in Ghana, when I went to live in Ghana.

MOYERS: Why Ghana, do you think?

ANGELOU: Well, the little towns in Ghana, Bill, you'd think you were in Texas, really. The little towns are just like our towns--yours in Texas and mine in Arkansas. Except that the people wear different clothes and have another language. But the same mores obtain. So I could have been in Stamps, Arkansas, for all intents and purposes.

MOYERS: You've lived through the era of civil rights, you have lived through the violent confrontations of the last ten years. What do you see happening now in race relations, and what's going on right now behind the curtain?
ANGELOU: Well, let me talk about what's going on out in front of the curtain first. And I'm quoting Cecil Williams, Reverend Cecil Williams, at Glide, who--this past Sunday, at Glide Memorial Church, said that he was asked by a non-black, "What's happening with the black movement? Why don't I see you doing anything?" And his response was, "What's happening to the white movement?"

The most positive thing that is happening in this country is Watergate.

MOYERS: Watergate?

ANGELOU: I believe so. Because white Americans--you see, there was a period when white Americans were marching in Selma and marching to Washington, for the blacks they thought, you see. But the struggle due to the Watergate is for the whites. It's for their morality, for their integrity. It's the first time since the early part of the nineteenth century there were whites who became Abolitionists and supported the Underground Railroad, not because they loved blacks but because they loved truth. And not since that time--I mean all the World War II business, where we all got together and balled up string, and so forth, was for somebody else. It was for the Jews and Europe.

But suddenly--not so suddenly--in the United States the people are concerned about their own morality, their own continuation. And it's very, very--and that, I believe, will reflect in turn and in time on the black American struggle.

MOYERS: How?

ANGELOU: Well, I think that white Americans will freely, once they clear up their own backyards, will be able to--that is to say their own internal selves about integrity and honesty, will have no out, no recourse, except to deal with the race question, which, as Dr. DuBois said at the turn of the century, "The problem for the Twentieth Century will be the problem of the color line." And that will be dealt with not from a paternalistic point of view, I hope. This is what I expect. Not at the sufferance of their time, their energy, or when they have--at somebody's whim, but because it is right to do. And if the country is to continue, if it is to continue to grow to be what it hopes to be, then certainly people will move because it is right to do so.

MOYERS: All right, so this is going on in front of the curtain.

ANGELOU: Yes.

MOYERS: What's going on behind the curtain?

ANGELOU: Well, I think that we have come to a place--black Americans have come to a place where they are taking a long, deep breath. And one sees that in history, that it does happen like that. Every so many years there is a surge forward. Herbert Aptheker has a great book called, "Black American Slave Revolts," in which he starts from the seventeenth century, the slave revolts, protest movements, and actual riots, and that sort of thing. And one sees that there is a kind of rhythm to a movement. And I think that we are at a pause now while people take deep breaths and try to decide.

MOYERS: You had a son, who is now 27, I guess.

ANGELOU: A fantastic son.

MOYERS: If you had a daughter, ten or 12 years of age, what would you say to her about growing up in this society?
ANGELOU: Oh, well, first, if I had a daughter--I'm at the point of adopting a child now, since I have no child in the home, and I love them--I respect all of them, white and black. My child I hope would be black because I have so much I can teach her and pull out of her.

I would say you might encounter many defeats but you must never be defeated, ever. In fact it might even be necessary to confront defeat. It might be necessary, to get over it, all the way through it, and go on. I would teach her to laugh a lot. Laugh a lot at the--at the silliest things and be very, very serious. I'd teach her to love life, I can bet you that.

MOYERS: When you were growing up in Stamps, Arkansas--That's your home....

ANGELOU: Yes. Where were you growing up at the same time?

MOYERS: Just 98 miles away.

ANGELOU: That's right.

MOYERS: Same pine trees.

ANGELOU: Right.

MOYERS: What did whites look like to an eight-year-old black?

ANGELOU: (Laughs) I didn't see them. I mean I didn't think that they were people. I thought whites were like ghosts, that if you put your hand on one, your finger would go all the way through (Laughs) I didn't....

MOYERS: You know what?

ANGELOU: What?

MOYERS: That's what we felt like. (Laughter from Angelou)

ANGELOU: I thought, you know, the real people were black people and the others were white folks. And they weren't--you didn't have--they didn't have kidneys and hearts, and things like that. They didn't cry. We knew that, you know, because black people--I used to see black people weep. So I knew they didn't cry, because people cried, and white folks just stayed white and floated around, like that. (Laughs)

MOYERS: Did you dream?

ANGELOU: Yes.

MOYERS: What?

ANGELOU: Well, at eight I dreamed once that--for a number of years, once I'd found--I'd go to the movies and I saw people like Shirley Temple and Judy somebody....

MOYERS: Garland.

ANGELOU: Judy....

MOYERS: Oh, Judy--
ANGELOU: And....

MOYERS: "Wizard of Oz."

ANGELOU: Not Judy Garland. But anyway, those young girls who were in the movies at the time. One is now a plumber on television. You know, she does the plumbing kind of thing.

MOYERS: Upward--downward mobility.

ANGELOU: (Laughs) Anyway, I saw them and thought, you know, they live such rich lives. Maybe that will happen. If--maybe I'm really a white girl. And what's going to happen is I am going to wake up. I'm going to have long blond hair and everybody is going to just go around loving me and sending me off to school. And I would wait at the ranch-gate for Johnny Mack Brown and--with a little bonnet on. It's tragic.

MOYERS: When did you realize it was only a dream?

ANGELOU: Oh, I--when I realized that I realized how lucky I was it was only a dream. (Laughter) By the time I was fourteen and I lived with my mother--and she is so full of joy and life. And I was her baby. So then that became better than being anything else in the world.

MOYERS: That world wasn't at all open to you. How did you manage to stay open to the world, open to hope?

ANGELOU: Well, I think you get to a place where you realize you have nothing to lose. Nothing at all. Then you have no reason to bind yourself. I had no reason to hold on. I found it stupid to hold on, to close myself up and hold within me nothing, to protect nothing. So I decided to try everything, to keep myself wide open to human beings, all human beings--seeing them as I understand them to be, not as they wish they were, but as I understand them to be. Very truthfully--not idealistically, but realistically. And seeing that if this person knew better he would do better. That doesn't mean that I don't protect myself from his action, you know.

MOYERS: Hm, hm.

ANGELOU: And dislike him for his actions. But certainly to accept that that's a human being; that too is human. I think that when we lose the prejudices, the fearful, frightening prejudices, that say a person like a multiple rapist, a murderer, that's inhuman--when we lose that and accept that that's human, that's human. Hopefully I'll never do it. But obviously if a human being did it, I have the potential, as human. And then, conversely, one can say, oh, there is a great masterpiece written; it's a marvelous composition written by a human being. A human being, only, wrote that. Being I am a human being, I have that potential.

MOYERS: What are you working on now, speaking of Maya Angelou as human being.

ANGELOU: Well, I have a new book out now. I mean "out," it will come out in the spring, called "Gather Together In My Name." It's a continuation of "Caged Bird." It takes the next four years. But I've just got a new assignment yesterday to do an adaptation of Sophocles's "Ajax," for the Los Angeles Mark Taper Forum. So I go to work on that now.
MOYERS: Surely not in rhyme.

ANGELOU: Yes, partly in rhyme. I've decided I'm going to keep the chorus in rhyme so that there will be a downbeat (laughs), so that people can be able to say, "Well, that's us."

MOYERS: Well, as I say, if Sophocles were alive today he'd be turning in his grave. (Laughter from Angelou)

ANGELOU: He never had it so good. He'd be so grateful.

MOYERS: Do you think that white critics have a right to judge black artists?

ANGELOU: Well, certainly I think they have a right. It would help if they understood what they were talking about. Quite often there are allusions made in black American writing, there are rhythms set in the writing and counter-rhythms which mean a great deal to blacks. A white American can come in and he will hear, he will understand, hopefully, the gist. And that's what one is talking about. The other is sort of "in" talk. I think that it's dangerous if we start setting up white critics as the end-all, be-all of a piece of work by a black writer, a black musician, because--there is a poem in a book of mine, called "Harlem Hopscotch." Now, hopscotch, anywhere it's done, is da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da-da.

But in Harlem, there's--that's basic. But there are other counter-rhythms that are going on, so that the kids stamp, "Dadadadadadat." See? So the poem says--I wrote--says, "One foot down, then hop is hot. Good things for the ones that's got. Another jump now to the left, everybody for himself. In the air, now both feet down. Since you're black don't stick around. Food is gone, rent is due. Your cousin's drunk, and then you get two. Everybody's out of work. You call for three and then twist and jerk. Count the line they count you out. But that's what's hoppin's all about. Both feet down, the game is down. They think you lost and I think you've won."

MOYERS: (Laughs)

ANGELOU: Now, when a non-black critic approaches the word, he's going to see the social implications in the rhymes, which are there, hopefully, because the kids who are jumping hopscotch in Harlem are thinking different thoughts than those who are jumping hopscotch on Park Avenue or in the Pacific Heights, or whatever.

But he will not hear. So it cracks up a black American audience when they hear it, because it's Ta-ta-ta-ta-ta, tum-da-teh. So he loses a great deal of...

MOYERS: Well, here we may get to the last immutable boundary, that might prove to be, it seems to me, the final frustration of people like--like us. How do you cross that boundary and get inside the skin?

ANGELOU: You don't have to. You don't have to. Really, being free is being able to accept people for what they are, and not try to understand all they are or be what they are. But if you're Italian and you have a certain family kind of feeling and understanding and love and love to sing and love to be, and all that, why can't I, if I were a Jew, simply accept that and you respect what mine is and we respect Mr. Chan over here and Mr. Mourisaky over there and Mrs. Brown down the street and Mr. Jones up the street, and say all of
them are good? Not change them. Not at all, Bill. I think one of the most
dangerous statements made in the United States, or descriptive phrases, is
that it's a melting-pot. And look at the goo it's produced.

MOYERS: Well, there isn't anywhere to go from there. So I thank you for
spending this time with Public Television. And I wish your new segment of your
autobiography great success.

ANGELOU: Thank you.

MOYERS: And I hope Sophocles comes alive again.

ANGELOU: I do, too. Thank you, Bill.

MOYERS: I have been talking to Maya Angelou, who no longer needs any
introduction. I'm Bill Moyers. Good night.

NOTE: This transcript is to be used for news and review purposes only. It
has been edited to eliminate interruptions and garbled speech.