

4

Maya Angelou (b. 1928) was born in St. Louis, Missouri. A single mother at age eighteen, she worked in her early years as a cook, San Francisco's first African American cable car conductor, and a nightclub dancer, in which capacity she took the name Maya Angelou. She went on to become a successful singer and actress. Angelou was active in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and in the 1970 published her first book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She has since published additional volumes of autobiography, poetry, plays, essays, and children's books. The following reflection appeared in the essay collection *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, published in 1993.

The Sweetness of Charity by Maya Angelou

The New Testament informs the reader that it is more blessed to give than to receive. I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver. The size and substance of the gift should be important to the recipient, but not to the donor save that the best thing one can give is that which is appreciated. The giver is as enriched as is the recipient, and more important, that intangible but very real psychic force of good in the world is increased.

When we cast our bread upon the waters, we can presume that someone downstream whose face we will never know will benefit from our action, as we who are downstream from another will profit from that grantor's gift.

Since time is the one immaterial object which we cannot influence –neither speed up nor slow down, add to nor diminish – it is an imponderably valuable gift. Each of us has a few minutes a day or a few hours a week which we could donate to an old folks' home or a children's hospital ward. The elderly whose pillows we plump or whose water pitchers we refill may or may not thank us for our gift, but the gift is upholding the foundation of the universe. The children to whom we read simple stories may or may not show gratitude, but each boon we give strengthens the pillars of the world.

While our gifts and the recipients should be considered, our bounty, once decided upon, should be without concern, overflowing one minute and forgotten the next.

Recently I was asked to speak before a group of philanthropists and was astonished at their self-consciousness. The gathered donors give tens of millions of dollars annually to medical research, educational development, art support, and social reform. Yet to a person they seemed a little, just a little, ashamed of themselves. I pondered their behavior and realized that someone had told someone that not only was it degrading to accept charity but it was equally debasing to give it. And sad to say, someone had believed that statement. Hence, many preferred to have it known that they dispense philanthropy rather than charity.

I like charitable people and like to think of myself as charitable, as being of a generous heart and a giving nature – of being a friend indeed to anyone in need. Why, I pondered, did the benefactors not feel as I?

Some benefactors may desire distance from the recipients of their largess because there is a separation between themselves and the resources they distribute. As inheritors or managers of fortune rather than direct earners, perhaps they feel exiled from the gifts; then it follows that they feel exiled from the recipient.

It is sad when people who give to the needy feel estranged from the objects of their generosity. They can take little, if any, relish from their acts of charity; therefore, are generous out of their duty rather than delight.

If we change the way we think of charity, our personal lives will be richer the larger world will be improved. When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed. "Charity. . . is kind; . . . envieth not; . . . vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up."