

2011 Holton-Arms School Commencement Address
Dr. Maya Angelou

FS: Graduates, parents, family, faculty, trustees, alumni, and friends, good morning. Imagine growing up as a young African-American in the old South where life was harsh and restrictive, heading West to become the first female cable car operator as a young teen in San Francisco. Pregnant senior year of high school and giving birth just weeks after graduation. Supporting a son as a single mother, living and working abroad and mastering half a dozen languages including Arabic and a West African dialect.

Editing a newspaper in Cairo, writing for another in Ghana, performing with the renowned choreographer and dancer, Alvin Alley. Helping to coordinate the Civil Rights Movement with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Authoring dozens of books, writing and reciting one of the proudest and most poignant poems broadcast worldwide for the inauguration of an American President. A passion for the truth, an appreciation for the simple, undaunted by the complex, bold and living large, Maya Angelou has taken risk after risk.

What she's reaped, well just look at her breathtaking contributions to American life. I'll state the obvious, she exemplifies I'll find a way or make one. So what better way to inspire our Holton women of 2011 who are just

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taking flight. This beautiful amphitheater is just packed this morning and we warmly, very, very warmly, welcome Maya Angelou.

MAYA ANGELOU

MA: When it looks like the sun wasn't going to shine anymore, God put a rainbow in the clouds. My goodness, isn't that nice. As you know that phrase from a 19th century spiritual was inspired by a statement in Genesis in the Geo Christian Bible. We are told that rain has persisted so unrelentingly that people thought it would never cease. And in an attempt to put the people at ease, in Genesis it says God put a rainbow in the sky.

But in the 19th century some African-American poet, probably a woman, I'm not sure, said no God didn't just put the rainbow in the sky, God put the rainbow in the clouds themselves. We know that suns and moons and stars and all sorts of illuminations are always in the firmament, but clouds can so lower and lower that the viewer can not see the light. But if the light is in the clouds themselves there's a possibility of seeing hope. You see?

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I thought of coming here and I thought of this high school, this school, really a school of higher education in the highest sense of a word, as a rainbow in the clouds. And I know that there are many people who are graduating this year who are representing families who have never had a graduate, and not a high school graduate. And so the school has been, the institution has been and is, and shall be for those who are yet to come, a rainbow in the clouds.

A chance, a possibility of seeing light. I don't know if I'm going to see you in some of the schools where I teach, I teach at Wake Forest University, I'm the (inaud.) professor there. And I teach, I'm Shibe Fellow at Yale, and on the Board at Harvard. I mumble around. I expect to see some of you in some of the schools where I appear. I would like you to have enough courage to come up and speak to me.

Come up and say, Miss Angelou, Dr. Angelou, or you can say yo if you insist. You can say I was in Maryland I heard you give the commencement address, I graduated last week and you gave the address three years ago, I heard about it. I want you to have enough courage. Men and women, courage is the most of all the virtues. Because without courage

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you can not practice any other virtue consistently. You can be anything erratically. Kind, true, generous, fair, merciful, just, any of those things occasionally.

But to be that thing time after time demands that you have courage. And I think that you're not born with courage, I don't believe that. I think you are born with ability to develop courage. If you wanted to pick up a 100 pound weight, unless you are a bodybuilder or something you wouldn't just go out and try to pick it up, you develop. You would start by picking up 5 pound weights, then 10 pound weights, 20 pound weights, 30, 50, and finally you would pick up the 100 pound weight.

I think you develop courage in the same way. Now I encourage young people and I take the license to take you young people because I'm now celebrating my 83rd year. So you are young people, understand I may be the oldest person here. And I want to encourage you to start in little ways. First, don't stay in any company where racial pejoratives are being released. The N word, the this word, the that word, don't be in an all white company when a word is used to denigrate brown people or black people or beige people.

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Don't be in an all black company and have white people denigrated. Don't do it. It is poison. The words are poison, children, my dears. They were created to denigrate, to dehumanize people. So I won't you see, I will not stay in any company where a person says, oh I can use the word because I am that. Well, I'm not. I mean, I'm not that N word, I'm not any of the pejoratives. I am a Jew. I am a Muslim, I'm a Buddhist. I'm trying to be a Christian which is no small matter.

But I will not stay in any company. Now I would encourage you to prepare yourselves, I'll tell you my reasoning. I was at 20th Century Fox as their first black female director/producer. And they gave me a huge office with sofas. And my secretary had an office, and the receptionist had an office. And the men came in, about four or five, they call them the Suits. The Suits came in, S-U-I-T. They came in with gold chains all down in the gray hairs in the chest. Well, that's another matter.

They came in and they strutted around and they paunched and they preened. And suddenly, and they let go a racial pejorative. Now it had nothing to do with any of us in the room. But somebody did denigrate the race of somebody

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else. So I said, excuse me I'm sorry, you can't use that word in my office. They said, oh come on, you know, we don't mean, I said but no you can't use it. I know it's poison. I know that it goes into the wallpaper and into the carpet, into the upholstery, into my clothes and finally into me. I won't have it.

So they said, finally the boss, the big head Suit, said your office? I mean, they had given me the office. So I said, the office I'm occupying at this moment. So one said, well what do you want from us? We gave you a parking space between Alan Alda and David Frost. What is that? And so finally they insisted upon using it. So I got up, I walked out of my office, through my secretary's office, through the receptionist's office, down a few steps and realized I'd left my purse, and the keys to my car were in the purse. I couldn't go back. So I hid in the bushes.

So I'm telling you now, when you prepare to walk out, try to make sure you have your keys. But there are ways in which you can develop courage. One way is to speak to people. Speak to people you don't know. Say good morning, good morning. You have no idea what you may have done for someone. She may have just hung up the phone from having a

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nurse say, Miss Jones the doctor wants you to come back in he's not satisfied with these x-rays. You don't know.

Or the man, when you say good morning, and you keep going. Don't try to pick him up or anything. Just say good morning and go on. You have no idea that the man may have just hung up the phone and someone has told him, Mr. Rislin I'm sorry to tell you but we are downsizing and your position has been done away with and we'd like you to come in and pick up your belongings. Now when he or she sees you and he's of another race, another color, another this or that, and he says who is that, does she go to my church, does he work in my building?

What you've done for a second is lifted the person, and you have become larger. These are ways in which you can develop courage. Try your best to be your best all the time. I would encourage you to read, read aloud, find some way to volunteer. Volunteer at a small school. I know you're brilliant or you wouldn't be here, and you're graduating, and so I know you're brilliant-brilliant. And that's wonderful.

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So I would like to encourage you to go to a kindergarten or to an elementary school and say, I'd like to maybe once a month come for an hour and read poetry to the children. Now at first the teacher will respond the same way a librarian will respond. We have ill-used librarians. They study their discipline with as much desire and as much energy as open heart surgeons and computer analysts. But as soon as they're posted we begin to ignore them.

Now so when you speak to the teacher of that elementary school or to a librarian, don't expect any immediate response. She'll be or he'll be so surprised at your offer. But after the shock is over the librarian or the teacher will say, thank you, yes, please. And I would encourage you to read poetry. Now I'm sorry to say some teachers make poetry a punishment. You didn't do your homework so you're going to have to read this poem.

Pitiful, it should be just the other way around. You didn't do your homework so you can't read this poem. Or you did your homework, I'm going to give you two poems to read. I would like you to know the power of poetry. I can tell you many stories, I can tell you a couple. I have had one child, I delivered one child, I have lots of children.

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Black ones and white ones, and Asian ones and Spanish speaking ones, and many, many children who call me Auntie or Ma.

And I speak a few languages so we can speak in a few languages. But I gave birth to one. And he had a serious automobile accident, he was in an automobile accident and at one time was paralyzed from the neck down. He, thank God and him, he walks with help, with sticks and a cane and that. But he's had a number of operations on his spine. So he's had them down in Miami, Florida at the Miami Project, which is a hospital attached to the University of Miami which deals with spinal cord injuries.

So my son had I guess about the sixth or seventh operation, and I was there for it, his wife and his son were there. And I came back to North Carolina where I mostly live. And about a week later he called me. He said, mom do you remember that poem Invictus. And I said, of course. But I remembered teaching it to him when he was about 10 years old, and seeing this little black boy walk round the house saying, I'm the night that covers me black as a pit from pole to. I said, yes I remember it.

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He asked me, would you please recite it? So I recited, Out of the night that covers me, black as a pit from pole to pole, I think whatever Gods may be for my uncomfortable soul. I did the whole poem through. And when I finished my son said, thanks Mom you forgot a verse. So I went back and I asked him and he reminded me. Then he asked would I do the entire poem with him. So we did the entire poem. And some of you know it and if you don't I would encourage you to learn it.

You will find you have need of it many times in your life. The last stanza is, It matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishment the scroll, I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul. When I finished with him he said, thanks mom they just finished taking over 100 stitches out of my back, love you, bye. You will find at some point that you will need Paul Laurence Dunbar, you will need Langston Hughes.

You will find at some point you need Edna Vincent Millay. You will need the poets from the 19th and 18th centuries, and you should have them not just on your computer and I-pads. Ah ha, you thought I didn't know that. A friend of mine just gave me an I-pad. She came to spend the night

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and she was making all these, I mean smiling and laughing. And I said, it's quite something if it makes you laugh. Oh she said. And about a few weeks later a big package came for me.

And my assistant who is also a daughter to me, said I bet it's your secret admirer. And it came, it was an I-pad from Oprah. So the first e-mail I sent out said, my children are trying to pull me into the 20th century, despite my luggish and lazy heels. But in any case, what you need is to memorize, memorize the poems. Just have four or five. You will need them my dears. And if I see you, if I'm still around and I'm speaking to people and you see me in five years, I would like to come up and say, Miss Angelou I did exactly what you said.

I memorized some Edna St. Vincent Millay. Listen to this poem, here's Millay. Now picture this woman. Okay, so she wasn't black, she's white, right? And small and thin and wan. A beautiful word, W-A-N, wan. We don't use it much anymore. In fact in Arkansas they call it puny. This woman, about to become the recluse she did become, was one of the most popular poets in the early 20th century. She wrote, I shall die but that is all I will do for death.

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I hear his horses on the stalls, he has business this morning, business in the Balkans, business in Cuba, but he must mount by himself, I will not give him a leg up. I'm not in his employ. I shall die, but that is all I do for death. With his horses hooves on my chest I will not tell him where the black boy lies hidden in the swamp. Brothers and sisters, the keys and the plans to the city are safe with me. Through me you will never be overthrown, for I shall die but that is all I will do for death. Huh?

You clap the woman, clap the woman, clap the woman. Yes, yes, yes. All those years ago I was living with my mother. I had been sent away when I was 3, my brother and I. Sent away from my mother and father. They separated and divorced in California. So were sent to my father's mother in a little village in Arkansas, about the size of this enclosure. And we stayed with grandmother and my Uncle Willie for about four years.

And then we were picked up and brought to St. Louis where my mother had returned to be with her family. We were there, and it was hard to understand those people. I mean, they spoke like this, and they put R's in words where they

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didn't belong, like lurnch (ph.), we'll go in and have lurch. I mean, they were so sedity (ph.). I could hardly understand them. But we tried, Bailey and I tried to become city kids. Alas, after about three months my mother's boyfriend raped me.

I told the name of the rapist to my brother who was everything to me, my black kingdom come, he was everything. Bailey told me, I told him I, he said I had to tell it. I said, no if I tell him he will kill you. He told me. So my brother was 9 years old, he said I won't let him. So I said okay, so I told him. The man was put in jail for one day and released. And about three days later the police came, big policeman, big white policeman, in blue surge uniforms with big brass buttons.

They looked like giants to me. I was 7. And they said, the man has been found dead and it seemed he was kicked to death. The statement so traumatized me that I stopped speaking. Stopped, and didn't speak again to anyone but my brother for six years. My mother and her family did their best to woo me away from my mutism but I wouldn't go. They didn't know that my voice could kill people. I thought if

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I spoke my voice might just go out the window, go out the door, and kill people, anybody.

So it was wiser for me and kinder for me not to speak. So I didn't. After a few months I think my mother's people, her family and she, wearied of the presence of this sullen, silent child. So they sent me back to my grandmother in Arkansas, back to Mamma. And Mamma was tall. When she died she was over 6 foot tall, and she'd braid my hair the way old black ladies still braid girls hair. You sit on the floor on a pillow, and the mamma takes a brush and starts to brush all this hair.

And my hair was very curly. I don't say nappy because that's a negative. You see? Asian hair and some white hair, if you put it under a microscope you would see that it's bone straight. Some hair is curly like that, and mine was very curly like that. That's it. And I had lots of it. So my grandmother would sit there, she'd bend her hand like this and put it behind my neck so she wouldn't break my neck by accident.

And she'd start brushing all this hair. She's say, sister mamma don't care what these people say about you must be an

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idiot, you must be a moron because you can't talk. Sister, mamma see you read that poetry and read those books, you keep on doing that. Don't worry about it, you're going to be a teacher sister, you're going to teach all over this world. Look at it, look at it. My goodness, I was just telling one of my hosts that I was recently translating (inaud.) Kruit in Yugoslavia, look at it.

This woman, this black woman who had gone through the 3rd grade in school owned the only black owned store in the town said that I would be a teacher. Only to find that she was right. I always thought, I mean for many years thought I was a writer who could teach. I found out I'm a teacher who can write. I have 31 books out, but I teach all the time. That's what I am. I'm a teacher. When I'm asked what do you do, I teach. So in those years I read, I read.

A black lady took me to the school, black school, and she said she wanted me to read every book in that library. Well, the library was probably half the size of the library in my private library, but it seemed to me that all the books in the world were there. So I read every book. I found I loved poetry. And so I would write. I had a little

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tablet and I'd write that I love poetry. And Mrs. Flowers was the name of the lady.

And she would ask me to speak some. I said that I love it. So she would read it to me. She had that Southern way that especially Southern women, black and white, they have a white of singing almost. You know what I mean, when they always sing, and they have, as if they have plumbs in their voices. Hello, darling. You're all speaking falsetto-ism. So Mrs. Flowers would read to me and she read Shakespeare sonnets to me.

And I thought Shakespeare's probably a black girl who had been molested in the South barefoot, and who people scorn. How else could he know when in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes I all alone bemoan my outcast state. And trouble a deaf heaven with my bootless cries, and look upon myself and curse my fate. Wishing me like to one more rich and hope, featured like him, like him with friends possessed, and desiring this man's art and that man's scope. And with I most enjoy contented least.

When in these thoughts myself almost despising, haply I think on thee, and then my state is like to the lark at

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break of day arising from sullen earth, I sing hymns at heaven's gate. For my, thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings that I would scorn to change my state with kinds. Now that's a sonnet, Shakespearean sonnet. Where you can compliment and you can understand why I thought at 10 years old that he had to be a black girl.

How would he know how it feels to despise oneself in secret because one had been molested. So what I'm saying to you graduates and next year's graduates, who I know many of you are here, I hope you are so you can see how wonderful this pomp and circumstance is. I want you to see that you go through the poetry, memorize some so you can have it. When you know you've done the best audition anybody could do and you're rejected.

When you know you've given the best interview you could possibly give and you don't get the job, you need to be able to pull something up in your mind without getting back to your computer or laptop. Pull it up. And my grandmother says, sister you know what that poetry does for you? It puts starch in your backbone. You see, it's an idiosyncratic saying, but it means it's exactly that, it makes you stand up straighter.

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So my encouragement to you young men and women is to, for yourself, be for yourself a rainbow in the clouds. When you see that you can do that for yourself you will see that you can be a rainbow in somebody else's cloud. And strangely enough many people think that they are graduating from this unique particular school so that they can go on and graduate from another university or college, and maybe another and another.

And maybe find that guy who's two inches taller and that girl a couple of inches shorter, get that piece of paper and find a job that pays you a little more than you're worth, and buy the three bedroom house and two car garage and have two and a half children. Some people think that's what this is all about, it isn't. All of this preparation is so that you'll be a rainbow in somebody's cloud. So that you will light up the path for somebody, who may not look like you.

May not call God the same name you call God, if she or he calls God at all. Being educated is a wonderful condition. It's interesting that there's a past tense to it, educated. I don't think it really should be used as a past tense. It

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is a continuum. You will continue to be educated. All your life I hope for you. It keeps you young, you see me? Well, okay, so I don't walk as well, you know what I mean. Okay. But my brain is at least young.

And sometimes I feel like a teenybopper, like I'm about 70 or 65. So I would encourage you to see yourselves, each of you, see yourselves as a potential rainbow in someone's cloud. I'm going to read a poem. I wanted to read this to you. And I'm going to give it to Miss Lowell, Mr. Wilson, Miss Delamary, and ask to put it on your website. I'd like you to have a copy of this. It's called a Brave and Starling Truth.

After I had written the inaugural poem for President Clinton, United Nations asked if you would write a poem for United Nations, in effect for the world. To celebrate the 50th anniversary of the founding of United Nations. Now look at this. I said yes, thank you, absolutely. I always say yes, and I want you to say yes to the good things, right away. And then you prepare yourself. You'll find help all along the way.

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In my case I say yes, thank you, and then I go to the rabbi and to the priest and to the imam, and then I go to little children and I go to old people and I go to the library, and I prepare myself. But when I was first called by United Nations I remember when United Nations was founded in San Francisco. I was 16 years old, about to graduate from high school. I was 6 foot tall, I was black even then. And I was pregnant and unmarried.

I read in the newspaper that simultaneous translators were being paid an enormous amount of money, \$150 a week, to work at United nations. I knew I had a penchant for language. I knew it, and it probably came from being mute for so long. I really learned to listen. I listened. So I thought if I wasn't 6 foot tall, black, pregnant, unmarried, and uneducated, I could go in that building. I would go down and watch Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt with her friend the black educator, Dr. Mary MacLoud Bethune, go into the building.

I saw all these women go in and I just wept. Imagine 50 years later United Nations asked me to write a poem and come in the building and deliver it. It was only because I had had so many rainbows in my clouds. I could think back

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and think on some of them whose names I know, and some whose names I will never know, some who were kind to me. White ones, black ones, Asian ones, Spanish speaking ones, who said good morning to me and said I believe you can do it. Try, do it. You see? So here's the poem.

And I'm not going to ask you to memorize it, but memorize a few lines of it, please. I wear these glasses because one eye of mine is errant, it goes off this way. I've seen photographs of myself with one eye going up and the other one going straight. And I think if I'm not careful this one will go all the way around and join. We, this people, on a small and lonely planet, travelling through casual space, past aloof stars across the way of indifferent suns to a destination where all signs tell us it is possible and imperative that we learn a brave and startling truth.

And when we come to it, to the day of peacemaking, when we release our fingers from fists of hostility, when we come to it, when we let the curtain fall on the minstrel show of hate and faces sooted with scorn are scrubbed clean, when battlefields and coliseum no longer rake our unique and particular sons and daughters up from the bruised and

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bloody grass, to lay them in identical plots in foreign soil.

When we come to it, when we let the rifles fall from our shoulders and our children can dress their dolls in flags of truce, when the landmines of death have been removed and our aged can walk into their evenings of peace, when childhood dreams are not kicked awake by nightmares of sexual abuse. Then we will confess, and not the pyramids with stones set in mysterious perfection, nor the Gardens of Babylon hanging as eternal beauty in our collective memory.

Not the Grand Canyon kindled into delicious color by Western sunsets, nor the Danube flowing its blue soul into Europe. Not the sacred peak of Mount Fuji stretching to the Rising Sun. Neither Father Amazon or Mother Mississippi, who without favor nurture all creatures in their depths and on their shores, those are not the only wonders of the world. We, this people, on this miniscule globe who reach daily for the bomb, the blade, the dagger, yet who petition in the dark but no tokens of peace.

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We this people on this mote of matter in whose thoughts can come such cankerous words that they challenge our existence, and in whose hands can come such cruel weapons that in a twinkling light is sapped from the living. Yet those same hands can touch with such healing, irresistible tenderness, that the haughty neck is happy to bow and the proud back is glad to bend. When we come to it we see that we learned that we are neither devils nor divines.

When we come to it we are created on this earth, of this earth, have the power to furnish for this earth, to fashion for this earth a climate where every man and every woman can live freely without sanctimonious piety and without crippling fear. When we come to it, we must confess that we are the true, we are the real, we are the pronounceable wonders of this world. That is when and only when it looks like the sun wasn't going to shine anymore. When we can say I am willing to be a rainbow in somebody's cloud. Congratulations.

END OF TAPE