**Graduation**

An excerpt from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings –* Maya Angelou

1 | The children in Stamps trembled visibly with anticipation. Some adults were excited too. Large classes were graduating from both the elementary school and the high school. Even those who were years away from their own graduation were anxious to help with preparations as a kind of practice. Parents who could afford it had ordered new shoes and readymade clothes for themselves. They also hired the women who did the best sewing to make graduation dresses and cut down secondhand pants for the important event. Oh, it was certainly important.

2 | White folks would attend the ceremony, and two or three would speak of God and home, and the Southern way of life. The principal’s wife would play the graduation march while the lower-grade graduates walked to their seats below the platform. The high school seniors would wait in empty classrooms to make their dramatic entrance. I was the person of the moment. Bailey had graduated the year before. My class was wearing yellow dresses, and Momma had put special effort into mine. I was going to be beautiful— a model of fine hand-sewing. It didn’t worry me that I was only twelve years old and was just graduating from eighth grade.

3 | I had started smiling more often, and my jaws hurt from the new activity. As a member of the winning team (the graduating class of 1940) I had put unpleasant feelings behind me. I was heading for freedom. My work had earned me a top place in my class and I was going to be one of the first called in the graduating ceremonies. No absences, no late arrivals, and my academic work was among the best of the year. My hair pleased me too. Gradually the black mass had lengthened and thickened, so that at last it stayed in its place and didn’t hurt my head when I tried to comb it. 58 Among Negroes the tradition was to give presents to children going only from one grade to another. How much more important this was when the person was graduating at the top of the class.

4 | Uncle Willie and Momma had sent away for a Mickey Mouse watch like Bailey’s. Louise gave me four handkerchiefs with hand-sewn designs. Mrs. Sneed, the ministers wife, made me an underskirt to wear for graduation, and nearly every customer gave me a nickel or even a dime with the instruction “Keep on moving to higher ground,” or similar encouragement. Amazingly the great day finally dawned and I was out of bed before I knew it. I threw open the back door to see it more clearly. I hoped the memory of that morning would never leave me. Barefoot in the backyard, I enjoyed the gentle warmth and thanked God that no matter what evil I had done in my life, He had allowed me to live to see this day.

5 | Bailey came out and gave me a box wrapped in Christmas paper. He said he had saved his money for months to pay for it. He was as proud of the gift as I was. It was a soft-leather copy o f a collection of poems by Edgar Allen Poe. I turned to “Annabel Lee,” my favorite, and we walked up and down the garden rows reading the beautiful lines. Momma made a Sunday breakfast although it was only Friday. After we finished the prayers, I opened my eyes to find the watch on my plate. It was a dream of a day. Everything went smoothly, and I didn’t have to be reminded of anything. Near evening I was too nervous to do my chores, so Bailey volunteered to do them all before his bath. Days before, we had made a sign for the Store, and as we turned out the lights, Momma hung it over the door handle. It read clearly: CLOSED. GRADUATION.

6 | My dress fitted perfectly and everyone said that I looked like a sunbeam in it. On the hill, going toward the school, Bailey walked behind with Uncle Willie, who wanted him to walk ahead with us because it embarrassed him to have to walk so slowly. Bailey said he’d let the ladies walk together, and the men would follow. We all laughed, nicely. The other members of my graduating class were standing around the front steps. I joined them and didn’t even see my family go in to find seats in the crowded room.

7 | The school band played a march and all the classes walked in as we had practiced. We stood in front of our seats until the principal signaled to us to take our seats. As I sat down, I was overcome with a feeling that something unplanned was going to happen, and we were going to be made to look bad. The principal welcomed “parents and friends” and asked the Baptist minister to lead us in prayer. When the principal spoke again, his voice had changed; it was weak and uncertain. He talked about Booker T. Washington, our “great leader.” Then he said a few things about friendship and the friendship of kindhearted people to those less fortunate than themselves. His voice could hardly be heard.

1. What is Maya Angelou’s feeling towards graduation in paragraphs 1 – 7? Why do you believe this is her feeling (use evidence from the text to support your answer)?

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2. Thinking about Maya Angelou’s feelings in paragraphs 1 – 7, what do you look forward to with anticipation and excitement about Amistad High School? Why?

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8 | When he finished, he paused and then said clearly, “Our speaker tonight, who is also our friend, came from Texarkana to deliver the graduation speech, but due to the irregularity of the train schedule, he’s going to, as they say, ‘speak and run.’” He said that we understood and wanted the man to know that we were most grateful for the time he was able to give us. Then he introduced Mr. Edward Donleavy.

9 | Not one but two white men came through the door at the side of the stage. The shorter one walked to the speaker’s platform and the tall one sat down in the principal’s seat. The Baptist minister gave the principal his chair and walked off the stage. Donleavy looked at the audience once (I’m sure that he only wanted to confirm that we were really there), adjusted his glasses, and began to read from a pile of papers.

10 | He was glad “to be here and to see the work going on just as it was in the other schools.” He told us of the wonderful changes we children in Stamps would see. The Central School (naturally, the white school was Central) had already been granted improvements that would be in use in the fall. A well-known artist was coming from Little Rock to teach art to them. They were going to have the newest equipment in their science laboratory. Mr. Donleavy made sure we knew who made these improvements available to Central High and said that we wouldn’t be ignored in the general improvement plan he had in mind.

11 | He said that he had pointed out to people at a very high level that one of the first-line football players at Arkansas Agricultural and Mechanical College had graduated from Lafayette County Training School. He went on to say how proud he was that “one of the best basketball players at Fisk University sank his first ball right here at Lafayette County Training School.”

12 | The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even included) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises.

13 | Owens and Louis were great Black heroes, but what school official in the white-kingdom of Little Rock had the right to decide that those two men must be our only heroes?

14 | The man’s words brought silence to the room. Held back by hard-learned manners, I couldn’t look behind me, but to my left and right the proud graduating class of 1940 had dropped their heads. Every girl in my row had found something new to do with her handkerchief.

15 | Graduation, the magic time of gifts and congratulations and diplomas, was finished for me before my name was called. The achievement was for nothing. All our learning was for nothing. Donleavy had shown us who we were. We were servants, farmers, and washer-women. Anything higher that we dreamed about was ridiculous. It was awful to be Negro and have no control over my life. It was terrible to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead.

16 | Donleavy was running for election, and assured our parents that if he won we would have the only cement playing field for colored people in that part of Arkansas. Also, we were sure to get new equipment for cooking, sewing, and woodworking classes. He finished, nodded to the men on the stage, and the tall man who was never introduced joined him at the door. They left with the attitude that now they were going to something really important. The ugliness they left could be felt in the air.

17 | My name had lost its familiarity and I had to be gently pushed to go and receive my diploma. All my preparations were forgotten. I neither marched up to the stage like a confident winner, nor did I look in the audience for Bailey’s nod of approval. Marguerite Johnson, I heard the name again. My honors were read, there were noises of appreciation in the audience, and I took my place on the stage as practiced. Then Henry Reed, our top graduate, was giving his speech, “To Be or Not to Be.” Hadn’t he heard the white folks? We couldn’t be, so the question was a waste of time. The world didn’t think we had minds, and they let us know it.

3. What is Maya Angelou’s feeling towards graduation in paragraphs 8 – 17? Why do you believe this is her feeling (use evidence from the text to support your answer)?

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4. Considering the message given by Mr. Donleavy, and Maya Angelou’s response in paragraphs 8 – 17, what messages are you hearing from our society that offend you? Who are these messages coming from? Why do these messages offend you?

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18 | I was amazed that Henry could give the speech as if we had a choice. I had been listening with my eyes closed and silently proving false each sentence; then there was a silence, which in an audience warns that something unplanned is happening. I looked up and saw Henry Reed, the perfectly-behaved boy, the A student, turn his back to the audience and turn to us (the proud graduating class of 1940) and sing, nearly speaking, “Lift every voice and sing...”

19 | It was the poem written by James Weldon Johnson. It was the music written by J. Rosamond Johnson. It was the Negro national anthem. We were singing it out of habit. Our mothers and fathers stood in the dark hall and joined the song of encouragement. Every child I knew had learned that song with the alphabet. But I personally had never heard it before. Never heard the words, despite the thousands of times I had sung them. Never thought they had anything to do with me. Now I heard, really heard it, for the first time.

20 | While echoes of the song hung in the air, Henry Reed bowed his head, said “Thank you,” and returned to his place in the line. The tears that slipped down many faces were not wiped away in shame. We were on top again. As always, again. We survived. I was no longer only a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race.

5. What is Maya Angelou’s feeling towards graduation in paragraphs 18 – 20? Why do you believe this is her feeling (use evidence from the text to support your answer)?

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6. Considering paragraphs 18 – 20, how does your community (friends, family, school, etc.) support you as you process, work through, and overcome some of these offensive messages projected by our society?

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7. Overall, how is Maya Angelou characterized in this chapter? Use evidence to support your claim.

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8. Imagine that you had an opportunity to write a letter to Mr. Donleavy after his speech. What would you say? **Write a letter to Mr. Donleavy below.**

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**The Value of College**

New York Times Blog – September 24, 2007

Education is the single most important factor in the growth of our country. Specifically, higher education paves a future and provides opportunity for students that attend college and gives them a shot at a career. 50 years ago, college was strictly for the elite, high class Americans. Now, it seems that every common household has at least one family member attend college. But with the increasing dropout rate today, students seem less interested in learning at college and their priorities change from their original goal of graduating. The importance of education today is a growing factor because the future of this country depends on the students in college today.

College is misunderstood by many incoming freshman. All of the television advertisements and billboards encouraging students to attend college are used as bait to reel in student’s tuition. Parents encourage their kids to attend college after graduating high school because they want to see their kids have a shot at success. However, college is not cut out for everyone. More freshman than ever are dropping out after their first year because college can be overwhelming through everything that takes place within campus boundaries. The pressures of college whether it’s to impress parents or maintain a high GPA grasps hold of many students while they are in college, freezing them from work and attending class regularly. Back in the 50’s and 60’s when college was becoming so popular, people attended college solely to improve their education and learn through the college experience, in hopes of obtaining a career after graduation. Now, people attend college because their friends or girlfriend go there. Many people attend college just to party as much as possible. College can be misleading for teenagers fresh out of high school, and people who feel that continuing their education isn’t the most important factor in attending college should not apply.

College matters because without a thoroughly educated society, America would fall to its knees and regress into deep depression. Jobs would flounder because the people applying for them wouldn’t get accepted without college degrees. Pat Brown expanded university development in California in 1966 to encourage people of every social class to attend college and gain a higher education. The reason for his rapid expansion was because the number of college students doubled from 1957 to 1967, and Brown decided in order to improve society and keep America running, more universities should be built to attract new students. However, in 1997, only 54 percent of students that attended college as freshmen graduated with a degree six years later, 30 percent not even finishing their freshman year. Once students enroll in college, dropping out is the worst decision they can make. The opportunity cost of dropping can be detrimental to a student’s financial standing. Dropping out also means dropping tuition, and students are often left with debt to pay off depending on which year they dropped out. Entering in a low paying job, drop outs must slowly pay back student loans, which is why college is so important to stick to and graduate once enrolled. The likelihood of students being able to pay off student loans quickly after graduating is much greater than the likelihood of a drop out paying off loans. Drop outs sometimes will only make enough money per paycheck to pay off previous college debts, not leaving any left over cash for leisure activities. Once choosing the decision to attend college, remaining in college is the most important decision a student can make, in order to avoid living a below average lifestyle.

College matters for other students because they may be on a sports scholarship in hopes of playing professionally one day. Many athletes attend college for free, with the scholarship as a motivator for them to learn. The college or university benefits from the athlete through publicity and the media. When athletes go on to become famous, endorsements and gifts are returned to the college in future years. Grants and scholarships are one of the best ways for a college to keep students interested and motivated during their years in school. By giving money to students with high educational capabilities, more students have a better focus on graduating and desire to fulfill a career. Respectively, the lower the cost a college offers, the more applications it will receive in a year. However, since college costs increase every year, it becomes harder and harder for colleges to distribute academic scholarship money, creating an increase on the amount of money paid per tuition. The more money a student pays for in tuition, the more pressure is exerted on the student to receive higher grades. This is especially true for students on academic scholarship. Pressures arise when a 3.8 GPA must be met. As a result of any lower GPA, an academic probation gets put into effect, creating even more pressure on a student to meet the grade requirements in the next semester. Grants and scholarships are important at every college because they keep students interested in their goal to graduate.

The future of America depends on the students in college today. Without successful graduation rates, there wouldn’t be opportunity for growth in this country. College matters because the future of our country depends on the scholars all colleges produce. Although dropout rates increase each year in America, application rates are also increasing because graduating high school students feel the need the attend college. Although some people may choose to attend college because their friends are or their parents did, college can turn out to be a complete success for some, or a complete disaster for others. College matters to the growth and development of any society. People that attend college are the individuals that want to make education a significant importance in their life, obtain a successful career, and live a wealthy life.

1. This author lists many different reasons to attend college. **List at least three different reasons that people go to college.**

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2. Imagine that you have become overwhelmed by the transition to high school in your first two months at Amistad. You are struggling to stay organized. You have a lower GPA than you had hoped for. You are stressed out about your upcoming final exams. *What would you want to remind yourself? What is your motivation to go to college and graduate? Why are you working so hard and attending the top high school in the state to get ahead and ensure your position in college?* **Write a letter to yourself in response to the prompt and questions stated above.**

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