

## Maya Angelou on Writing

HUMANITIES: This passage, in which Maya Angelou discusses her writing, is adapted from an interview conducted by Naomi Epel with Angelou that appears in *Writers Dreaming: 25 Writers Talk About Their Dreams and the Creative Process* (©1993 by Naomi Epel).

I am an autobiographer as opposed to a fiction writer. In my case I have to remember facts and try to use my talent or my art or my creativity to tell the truth about the facts. I submit that there's a world of difference between truth and fact. Fact tells us the data: the numbers, the places where, the people who, and the times when. But facts can obscure the truth. Because I write about a time when real people were alive—I mean, it's not as if that is a time which I can create out of the full complement of my imagination—I have to get back to get the facts. But then I have to do something else in order to tell the truth of the matter.

Sometimes one is obliged to take time out of time and to redefine, to set the time at another time. Or take things out of consequence, out of sequence. They become more consequential when you have the liberty to take them out of sequence.

I suppose I do get “blocked” sometimes but I don't like to call it that. That seems to give it more power than I want it to have. What I try to do is write. I may write for two weeks “the cat sat on the mat, that is that, not a rat,” you know. And it might just be the most boring and awful stuff. But I try. When I'm writing, I write. And then it's as if the muse is convinced that I'm serious and says, “Okay. Okay. I'll come.”

To write well, to write so that a reader thinks she's making up the book as she goes along, that's hard. To be in such control of language! First off, one has to

translate what one thinks into words, which is always impossible. And then into such gracious and graceful words that the reader can take it in, almost as a palliative, without even knowing, and be somehow increased as a result. That means that one is offering the reader something twice translated: The reader is going to translate it again. So, to write it so well that you can at least

approximate what you mean to say, that's very hard. And to write so that it seems to leap off the page—

Maybe, if a writer is hesitant to get to a depth in a character, to admit that this fictional character does this, or thinks this, or has acted this way—or that an event was really this terrifying—the brain says, “Okay, you go on and go to sleep, I'll take care of it. I'll show you where that is.”

One sees that the brain allows the dreamer to be more bold than he or she ever would be in real time. The dream allows the person to do things, and think things, and go places, and be acted upon. The person, in real time, would never do those things. It may be that's a way the brain has of saying, “Well let me let you come on down and see what really is down here.”

There's a phrase in West Africa called “deep talk.” When a person is informed about a situation, an older person will often use a parable, an axiom, and then add the end of the axiom, “Take that as deep talk.” Meaning that you will never find the answer. You can continue to go down deeper and deeper. Dreams may be deep talk.