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## Maya Angelou's Letter to My Daughter

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# Maya Angelou's Letter to My Daughter

Marilyn L. Grady

In preparing an essay on James Bryant Conant, I was struck by the title of his autobiography, *My Several Lives: Memoirs of a Social Inventor* (1970). The title is apropos in that Conant's career was as a professor of organic chemistry and physics, president of Harvard University from 1933 to 1953, chief civilian administrator of American nuclear research, participant in the Manhattan project, participant in the decision on the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, U.S. Ambassador to Germany, and education reform advocate and author. Among the books he wrote were: *The American High School Today* (1959), *Slums and Suburbs* (1961), *The Education of American Teachers* (1963), and *The Comprehensive High School* (1967). He is one of the founders of the Education Commission of the States (Grady, 2008).

In 2008, we describe individuals "reinventing themselves" or marvel at how long we may live and how many job changes we can expect to have in our working lives. I believe Conant may have set the "bar" for reinvention or job changes. He lived from 1893–1978. *The Papers of James Bryant Conant*, located in the Harvard University Archives, chronicle his many accomplishments during his "several lives."

Maya Angelou has written her "several lives" in a series of autobiographical novels: *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name*, *Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin' Merry Like Christmas*, *the Heart of a Woman*, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, and *A Song Flung Up to Heaven*. In *Letter to My Daughter*, Maya Angelou offers yet another glimpse of the lives she has lived. She addresses the book to her "thousands of daughters." The book, however, recounts the lessons she's learned through a lifetime of experiences. I expect her "sons" would appreciate the letter as well.

Among the many passages that hold value for me:

"I learned that a friend may be waiting behind a stranger's face." (p. 75)

"I learned to bring everything I had onto the stage with me." (80)

"I am remembering what Arkansas gave me. I came to understand that I can never forget where I came from. My soul should always look back and wonder at the mountains I had climbed and the rivers I had forged and the challenges which still await down the road. I am strengthened by that knowledge." (p. 96–97)

Both James Bryant Conant and Maya Angelou are prolific authors. Both have made significant contributions through their writings. We should take their lead and be prolific authors as we, too, lead our “several lives.”

### **References**

- Angelou, M. (2008). *Letter to My Daughter*. New York: Random House.
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- Grady, M.L. (2008). (In Press) James Bryant Conant. *Encyclopedia of Educational Reform and Dissent*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.