



The Day I Learned The Value of a Smile, by Maya Angelou

My paternal grandmother who raised me had a remarkable influence on how I saw the world and how I reckoned my place in it. She was the picture of dignity. She spoke softly and walked slowly, with her hands behind her back, fingers laced together. I imitated her so successfully that neighbors called me her shadow.

"Sister Henderson, I see you got your shadow with you again."

Grandmother would look at me and smile. "Well, I guess youâ€™re right. If I stop, she stops. If I go, she goes."

When I was thirteen, my grandmother took me back to California to join my mother, and she returned immediately to Arkansas. The California house was a world away from that little home in which I grew up in Arkansas. My mother wore her straight hair in a severe stylish bob. My grandmother didnâ€™t believe in hot curling womenâ€™s hair, so I had grown up with a braided natural. Grandmother turned our radio on to listen to the news, religious music, Gang Busters, and The Lone Ranger. In California my mother wore lipstick and rouge and played loud blues music and jazz on a record player. Her house was full of people who laughed a lot and talked loudly. I definitely did not belong. I walked around in that worldly atmosphere, with my hands clasped behind my back, my hair pulled back in a tight braid, humming a Christian song.

My mother watched me for about two weeks. Then we had what was to become familiar as, "a sit down talk to."

She said, "Maya, you disapprove of me because I am not like your grandmother. Thatâ€™s true. I am not. But I am your mother and I am working some part of my anatomy off to buy you good clothes and give you well-prepared food and keep this roof over your head. When you go to school, the teacher will smile at you and you will smile back. Other students you donâ€™t even know will smile and you will smile. But on the other hand, I am your mother. I tell you what I want you to do. If you can force one smile on your face for strangers, do it for me. I promise you I will appreciate it."

She put her hand on my cheek and smiled. "Come on baby, smile for mother. Come on."

She made a funny face and against my wishes, I smiled. She kissed me on the lips and started to cry.

"Thatâ€™s the first time I have seen you smile. It is a beautiful

smile, Motherâ€™s beautiful daughter can smile."

I had never been called beautiful and no one in my memory had ever called me daughter.

That day, I learned that I could be a giver by simply bringing a smile to another person. The ensuing years have taught me that a kind word, a vote of support is a charitable gift. I can move over and make another place for someone. I can turn my music up if it pleases, or down if it is annoying.

I may never be known as a philanthropist, but I certainly am a lover of mankind, and I will give freely of my resources.

I am happy to describe myself as charitable.

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