

Level II

Second Place Winner

Rhea Pathak

(Grade 7: Hastings Middle School, Upper Arlington. Sponsor: Renee Stevenson)
Letter to Dr. Maya Angelou (1928-2014) concerning her poem, "Human Family"

Dear Maya Angelou,

Poetry is one of the most beautiful forms of writing. I've read countless poems. Different styles, rhyme schemes, tones, moods, and lengths. But none of them were as beautiful as your poem, "Human Family." The poem was beautiful, not because it used fancy words that no one uses anymore (like most poems), but that it greatly influenced me, and changed the way I see the world.

I am ethnically different from most people I know. My parents emigrated from India about 20 years ago. I feel like part of me is Indian and part of me is American. I don't belong to either of the two. When I visit India, I feel out of place and when I live here, I sometimes feel out of place, too.

"We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike," you wrote. Your poem told me that no matter how different I might be, I'm still the same as everyone else. I feel the same feelings, love the same way, share the same laughter, and cry the same tears.

I've been exposed to many different cultures, places, and ideas. I've been to festivals, celebrated different holidays, and sang different songs from across the world. Whenever I do these things, I feel connected to everyone. I've learned, by following these different cultures, that the world is a very diverse place.

But after reading your poem, I realized something. No matter where you are from, no matter what you believe in, everyone is similar. We all feel emotions. We've all experienced joy, guilt, sadness, humor, envy, fear, anger, the list goes on and on. But the most important similarity we all share is how we all care about people. We care about our friends, our family, and our neighbors. We all care. We all have good hearts.

Your poem helped me recognize this, and it is beautiful. Despite how different we all might be, we all are one. "In minor ways we differ, in major ways we're the same." Again, repeating the message that we all are so similar, even if we don't realize it. We are all part of the human family.

But of course, your poem also told me that as similar as we are, our small differences are very special.

I've sailed upon the seven seas
and stopped in every land
I've seen the wonders of the world,
yet not one common man.

I used to be ashamed of my differences. Whenever we would have to make a small project about ourselves, I wouldn't mention my heritage. I wouldn't mention it at all, even if asked about it. I was afraid people would think I was weird. Now, I wear my differences with

pride, thanks to your poem. Knowing that people love to hear about differences, I share all the fun things I do, like celebrating Diwali, wearing Indian dresses, and doodling patterns that originated from India all over my notes.

As you can see, this poem has helped me in so many ways. It taught me something about the world, helped me see others in a different light, and most importantly, it helped me value myself for who I am. Thank you for writing “Human Family.”

With love,

Rhea Pathak, age 12