

REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH  
“Finding Common Ground”  
Maya Angelou Introduction, November 15, 2006

It is exciting to welcome all of you to this special keynote address for Georgia Tech’s new series of talks and forums called Finding Common Ground.

Universities have been around for many centuries, and they have their roots in ancient forums that were organized to promote the civilized and rational discussion of the controversial issues of the day. Finding Common Ground is an initiative by Georgia Tech students that continues that deeply rooted heritage by gathering students, faculty, and staff to speak, listen, think, and reason together.

Over the past several days, we have had three workshops to explore issues that are divisive and controversial in our world today, and tonight’s talk by Maya Angelou is the culmination of Finding Common Ground. I want to thank and congratulate the students, faculty, and staff who worked so hard to give our campus community this important opportunity for civil discourse in the search for common ground where we can learn to respect and appreciate each other’s perspectives.

Georgia Tech students come from all around the world, bringing their own beliefs, cultures, and perspectives with them. They have all worked very hard to get here, and they are all working very hard to stay here. So, while we honor free speech, we also respect each one of our students, faculty, and staff, and our goal is to create an environment in which no one is harassed or intimidated, but everyone is respected and has the opportunity to succeed.

As Americans, we treasure our constitutional right of free speech. But it is important to recognize that free speech is not simply the right to say whatever we want about anything or anybody. That definition is both one-sided and also represents only the most rudimentary, primitive sense of what free speech really means.

There are two sides to every coin, and the other side of speaking is listening. Poet Robert Frost once said, “Education is the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or your self-confidence.” If we want to have free speech, then we have to accept that as a result we will need to listen to things with which we may not agree. If we want others to listen respectfully when we present our point of view, then we need to become respectful listeners to the perspectives of others.

All of us have ideas, experience, and perspectives to bring to the table, but none of us knows so much about life and the world that we have nothing to learn from listening to others. The willingness to listen and to look at things from the perspective of others enriches our personal understanding of life and the world, and is also an essential part of succeeding in today’s global economy.

Both Maya Angelou and I grew up in the South during the era of segregation. As an African American citizen in those days, Maya Angelou did not have the right of free speech. But neither did I as a white citizen. In the course of denying African Americans the right to free speech, whites simultaneously gave up their own prospect for free speech, because the opportunity for dialog was lost. Neither side was willing to listen to the other; neither side respected the other. There was no opportunity to find common ground, to the detriment of both races. Tonight, I am honored to have the opportunity to listen and learn from one of the greatest voices of contemporary literature who has demonstrated a remarkable ability to shatter barriers and divisions in the search for common ground.

Maya Angelou was born in Missouri, but went to live with her grandmother in Arkansas at the age of three when her parents divorced. At age seven, she returned to live with her mother and was raped by her mother's boyfriend. As a result of this devastating experience, she became selectively mute for four years, speaking only to her brother. So she has a unique personal perspective on the matter of free speech.

For the rest of her childhood, she was shuttled back and forth between her parents and grandmother in the South and on the West Coast, living with constant disorder and difficulty. By the time she reached the age of most of you students here this evening, she had been a Creole cook, a streetcar conductor, a cocktail waitress, a dancer, and an unwed mother. But all of those experiences prepared her for the remarkable achievements of her life as one of the world's most admired Renaissance women. As the title of one of her personal essays declares, "Wouldn't take nothing for my journey now."

In the course of her journey, Maya Angelou became a poet, educator, historian, civil rights activist, best-selling author, actress, playwright, producer, and director. She has written a long list of books, poems, plays, and screen plays, and is no stranger to the *New York Times* best seller list. She has appeared in plays, films, and television programs that range from PBS specials to Broadway shows, and has been nominated for Tonys, Emmys, Grammys, and Pulitzers.

She speaks English, French, Spanish, Italian, Arabic, and the Ghanaian language of Fanti. She has taught modern dance at the Rome Opera House and served as feature editor of the Ghanaian publication *African Review*. She has taught at the University of Ghana and the University of Kansas, and in 1981 she became the first Reynolds Professor of African American Studies at Wake Forest University – an appointment she still holds.

During the Civil Rights Era, Martin Luther King, Jr. asked her to serve as the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. President Gerald Ford appointed her a member of the American Revolution Bicentennial Council. President Jimmy Carter appointed her to the Presidential Commission for International Women's Year. At President Bill Clinton's inauguration, she recited a poem she wrote especially for the occasion. She and Robert Frost are the only poets in American history to have participated in a presidential inaugural ceremony.

She is the recipient of nearly 100 honors and awards, including almost three dozen honorary degrees from colleges and universities.

At this time, it is my great honor and privilege to present to you Maya Angelou.