

I'd Like You to Meet Angie:

A Critical Analysis of Leaver's Endorsement of *I Have Arrived before My Words*

You need to meet Angie, as I have, through her words. In her autobiography in *I Have Arrived before My Words*, an anthology of memoirs written by five homeless women, Angie introduces herself as an African-American woman living in Washington D.C. who struggled as a single parent to raise her two sons, all the while courageously battling breast cancer, mental illness, homelessness and permanent disability. It's because Angie is so courageous that you need to meet her and that I am compelled to introduce her. In a review of the collection of memoirs in which Angie's life story has been published, Judy Leaver, Vice President of the National Mental Health Association, states: "The courage of these women is humbling ... (Pugh unpagged). Absolutely. I especially agree, in Angie's case. Evidence of courage can be found in all five women's stories, but the courage in Angie's story hits the reader right between the eyes, and in the heart. After reading all five memoirs, I am drawn back over and over to Angie's. I ask myself if I have the kind of courage she showed every day. Could I face the challenges she has and muster the courage to try to do better with my life? Leaver is right. Angie's courage is humbling.

Before I explain where I find great courage in Angie's story, let me first give you a little more background on the challenges she has faced. When her boys were still in grade school, Angie discovered a lump in her right breast. After a radical mastectomy surgery that removed her right breast, radiation treatments that severely burned her and six skin grafts to repair the damage, Angie lost the use of her right arm. She was right-handed and took up creative writing. Angie is no stranger to hospitals. Throughout her life she, suffered terribly with depression and was hospitalized for it several times. She was improperly diagnosed and medicated for about thirty years. For decades, then, Angie kept seeking help, until finally she was properly diagnosed as a manic-depressive and put on medication that allowed her to function consistently. By the time Angie was finally put on proper medication, she had been unable to work for so long that she lost her apartment and spent a year homeless. Through it all, she faced the challenges and took steps to give herself a better life.

It takes genuine courage to make choices and not just let life happen. In speaking about her mental illness, Angie tells us: "I admitted I had a problem and took the necessary steps to remedy the situation" (Pugh 153). She sought the help of many different therapists and tried "every psychotropic drug known to man ..." (Pugh 164). She explains how she could feel the depression coming on and "... would check myself into the hospital" (Pugh

164). How many people put off going to the doctor or dentist for fear of what they may have done to them? The hardest part is often to take that first step to ask for help; it means admitting that there is something wrong and confronting the possibility that it could be seriously wrong. It means having the courage to accept treatment. I think it also means having the courage to tell care-givers when they are not helping and starting all over again to find someone who can. For thirty years, three decades, Angie kept seeking out new therapists and doctors, because she didn't feel the treatment she had gotten was effective against her problem. After trying several medications, she says "... I kept getting sick" (Pugh 164). In thirty years of swimming against the tide, somehow Angie found the strength to keep trying.

This kind of courage can be defined as daring and defiance in spite of fear. I think a very fearful time for Angie must have been while she was trying to teach herself to write with her left hand. Angie admits that "teaching myself to write with my left hand was a major challenge" (Pugh 165-166). Once she had lost the use of her right hand, she failed repeatedly at trying to resume the creative activities she performed before. She tried, but she could no longer sew, paint, play guitar, crochet or write. Imagine the courage it must have taken to defy the fear of failure again and again, to not only learn to write, but to master control of her left hand. How many long, frustrating, hopeless hours there must have been as she struggled with a cramping, tired left hand. To better appreciate Angie's courage, I wanted to find out just how difficult it is for the average person to re-learn to write. In a telephone interview with Shirley, a hand therapist for Davies Medical Center, I learned that it is very hard and very frustrating, but with several months of diligent practice, some people are successful. Shirley further explained that the assistance of a therapist is not essential; the most important thing, she emphasized, is for the person to keep practicing, no matter how hard and frustrating it gets. I think this is the courage of perseverance.

As a result of learning how to write with her left hand, Angie began to explore the healing quality of writing her autobiography. I think the greatest courage is shown by Angie telling her story. Inspired by a devotion to herself, to her children and to her readers, she faces her difficult past again in hopes that her words may inspire someone else. She honestly tells her readers that, "It has been an emotionally and physically tumultuous life with many traumas ..." (Pugh 165). Angie suffered through breast cancer surgery, radiation treatment, permanent loss of the use of her right hand, manic-depression and homelessness. And yet, in the end, she tells us: "I continue to believe in the possibility of being and feeling well and whole; to believe in the possibility of healing ..." (Pugh 165).

Angie has found that “The writing is very therapeutic, a very important part of the ongoing process of healing and reconnecting the whole and creative female that I think I was at the outset (Pugh 165). I think she says this to encourage herself and her readers. She gives her testimony to the rewards of facing life’s challenges. The pay-off we find in her final words: “I have, in a sense come home into my own serenity and peace” (Pugh 165). It doesn’t get much better than that. Angie finally validates her struggle and tells her readers that the gift you give yourself for being courageous and striving for better is to eventually come to feel peace and serenity.

Well, has it been worth your while to meet Angie? Did her story make you think about the challenges in your life or in the life of someone you know? I think Judy Leaver’s statement about Angie’s courage being humbling is right on target. I have certainly found the experience of Angie’s story to be humbling. I’ve faced some challenges in my life and have tried to find the courage to get through, but I know what I’ll be thinking about for some time to come. When I’m having a tough day, I just need to imagine trying to do it homeless, on the wrong drugs and without my right arm. Now, that takes courage.

Pugh, Deborah and Jeanie Tietjen, eds. *I Have Arrived before My Words: A Collection of Memoirs by Homeless Women*. Alexandria, VA: Three Rivers Press, 1995.