

## Søren Kierkegaard's Despair and Maya Angelou's Blues: Pedagogy of Suffering

Kevin Gary

*Valparaiso University*

### INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on our distracted culture, comedian Louis C.K. explains why he does not want his kids to have a cell phone.<sup>1</sup> These devices, he argues, divert us from the task of becoming a real person. Echoing Blaise Pascal, C.K. says that being a real person requires the capacity to sit still. Instead, we tend to fidget, check email, text, game, surf, and so on, drawn into the “Total Noise” that is the sound of U.S. culture.<sup>2</sup> The underlying reason, C.K. observes, is that thing: “because you know, underneath everything in your life there is that thing ... that empty, forever empty ... just that knowledge that it is all for nothing and you are all alone.... It’s down there.”

The alternative, C.K. contends, is to go into and confront the abyss that resides at the center of the self. He offers a personal example: “Sometimes when things clear away and you’re not watching anything, and you are in your car, and you start going, ‘oh no, here it comes’ that ‘I’m alone’; it starts to visit on you — just this sadness, life is tremendously sad, just by being in it.” At times, C.K. says, he is able to face the “thing” head on. When he does, he is overcome by an overwhelming sorrow that leads to weeping. His lamentation is eventually followed by a sense of profound and genuine happiness that is inexplicable, as it is not tied to a product or external stimuli, but rather springs from movements interior to the self.

More often than not, however, C.K. says we resist confronting the “forever empty thing.” Because “we don’t want the first little bit of sad, we push it away with like a little phone, jerking off, or the food.” As a consequence, we “never feel completely sad or completely happy. [We] just feel kind of satisfied with [our] products, and then [we] die.” C.K. concludes by saying, “So that’s why I don’t want to get a phone for my kids.”

C.K.’s account of modern distraction and self-evasion echoes Søren Kierkegaard’s diagnosis of the human condition. Surveying the human scene, Kierkegaard also observes a tendency to flit from distraction to distraction. In this propensity he identifies a way of life — a common default setting that he describes as the aesthetic sphere or modality. The aesthete, bent on minimizing suffering and maximizing pleasure, skips from one thing to the next, easily prone to boredom. Underneath this perpetual diversion is an avoidance of that “thing” or what Kierkegaard refers to as despair.<sup>3</sup>

According to both Kierkegaard and C.K., becoming a person is not a given but a task, and a central part of this task involves confronting the despair and sadness of the human condition. A manifestation of this hard-won confrontation is what Cornel West describes as a blues sensibility. Where the despairing aesthete retreats into the comedic or trivial, a blues sensibility squarely faces the tragic and the profound. A blues-inflected person, explains West, recognizes the catastrophes that abound in

life, both personal and societal, and does not hide, ignore, or whitewash them, but responds to them with emboldened self-agency and compassion.<sup>4</sup>

This essay explores the transition from despair-avoidance to a blues sensibility, considering what kind of pedagogy, if any, might catalyze this movement. First, drawing from Kierkegaard, I elaborate further on the nature of despair, noting how it is fundamentally an avoidance of the self that leads to a diminished self and a lack of self-agency. Second, with the guidance of West, among others, I sketch the contours of a blues sensibility, noting how, in its confrontation with despair, it forges an empowered self that is grounded in hope. Finally, I turn to Maya Angelou's account of her eighth-grade graduation story in her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Charting her interior movements, Angelou illuminates her own transition from despair to the blues. In so doing, she reveals the key dynamics of what might constitute a blues pedagogy.

#### DESPAIR AND BEING A PERSON

Despair is one of the darker, hidden forms of human suffering. In the abstract, Kierkegaard notes, despair is a surpassing excellence that distinguishes us from other animals. In the concrete, however, despair is a horrible sickness. At its core it is self-loathing and a rejection of the self. Despair ultimately consists of despairingly willing to get rid of oneself. It is often misconstrued as despair over something, but ultimately despair is over oneself. For instance, in wanting to be like someone else, one may despair over not being more like that person, but really this despair is despairing over the self one is and being stuck with that self. In short, despair wants to be rid of the self one is or affirm a self one is not. It "is a self-consuming but an impotent self-consuming that cannot do what it wants to do, to consume itself."<sup>5</sup>

Rather than confront and face despair (or C.K.'s "thing"), the aesthete's modus operandi is to run from it, either consciously or unconsciously.<sup>6</sup> This flight from the self can take on all manner of neuroses, including suicide, plastic surgery, tennis (as Blaise Pascal observed in his time), heroin, solitaire, gaming, pornography, the pursuit of power and status, sports, geometry, Dorian Grey's obsession with the theatre — anything to get away from the self one despises.<sup>7</sup> These activities are not a giving away of the self (that is, a sacrificing oneself for another person) but rather attempts to obliterate the self. They can be neurotic, as Carl Jung observes, insofar as they serve as substitutes for legitimate suffering.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever form it takes, despair in the end stunts self-formation. In one way or another, a despairing person shirks the task of becoming an existing self, which requires, according to Kierkegaard, properly relating or synthesizing the two major parts of the self, possibility and necessity.<sup>9</sup> Possibility refers to our capacity to imagine and entertain alternatives, an ability to imagine a better self. It is the capacity, echoing Maxine Greene, to see things as if they could be otherwise. Necessity refers to the concrete givens of one's existence, including one's life circumstances, as well as one's physical and mental capacities and one's social circumstances.

Synthesizing necessity and possibility is not a given but a task, a constant ongoing task that we often forgo. Rather than achieving and maintaining this synthesis,

Kierkegaard notes how we oscillate towards the despair of possibility — getting lost in or chasing an imaginary, idealized self — or the despair of necessity — characterized by a hardened resignation that negates alternative possibilities. An example of the despair of possibility was on display in a recent National Public Radio (NPR) report on the popularity of plastic surgery in Brazil.<sup>10</sup> The story's major protagonist was Maria de Gloria. Maria,

is 46 but looks 30. She's unemployed but has had six surgeries at the Pitanguy Institute.... [Reflecting on her situation, she says] 'I'm much happier, there is no doubt about it. My bottom will never sag, my breasts will never sag. They will always be there, hard. It is very good to look at the mirror and feel fine,' she says. When I ask her if it was all worth it, she tells me she has a 21-year-old lover. 'Things have gotten a lot better,' she quips.

This story is particularly disturbing because the selves that are despised are embodied selves that do not measure up to an idealized (and artificial) Hollywood self, situated within a patriarchal context.

Yet a pressing awareness of our mortality can just as easily fluctuate towards the despair of necessity. Woody Allen's character, from *Hannah and Her Sisters*, bemoans "the inevitable decay of the body." In light of this, he wonders, what is the point of doing anything? An even more disturbing example of the despair of necessity is illustrated by Fyodor Dostoevsky's ridiculous man, who, after much anguish, reaches the following conclusion, "I suddenly felt that it was all the same to me whether the world existed or whether there had never been anything at all: I began to feel with all my being that there was nothing existing."<sup>11</sup> Soon after this "insight," the ridiculous man resolves to kill himself.

The opposite of the ridiculous man's despair is suggested by the protagonist and narrator of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, "What is the nature of the search? you ask. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair."<sup>12</sup> The ridiculous man is on to nothing, and this nothing eviscerates the pathos that might prompt such a search.

Though fundamentally a problem with the self, despair is manifest at a macro level. West, drawing from Henry James, describes America as a hotel civilization "in which people are obsessed with comfort, contentment, and convenience, where the lights are always on."<sup>13</sup> This, as Kierkegaard notes, is the aesthetic modality writ large — a culture that prompts the flight from despair and suffering.

A symptom of this, notes Walter Brueggemann, is numbness towards death.<sup>14</sup> Charles Taylor elaborates on our modern discomfort with death and aging — a necessity of our embodied selves: "We very often feel awkward at a funeral, don't know what to say to the bereaved, and are often tempted to avoid the issue if we can."<sup>15</sup> Within a culture of despair, notes Brueggemann, we "have no adequate way to relate to death's reality and potential, so we deny it with numbness."<sup>16</sup> Death, rather than occasioning the emergence of an authentic self, is denied, avoided, or anaesthetized. Facing death, we suffer what Brueggemann describes as a symbol gap, wherein we lack "symbols [and rituals] that are deep or strong enough to match the terror of the reality."<sup>17</sup>

This symbol gap was acutely on display when *60 Minutes* aired Dr. Jack Kevorkian euthanizing Thomas Youk, a fifty-two-year-old man, racked by Lou Gehrig's disease. Dr. Kevorkian, with his intravenous cocktail of fatal drugs at the ready, asks, "Tom, do you want to go ahead with this?" Youk, wearing green plaid pajamas and sitting in a chair in his suburban Detroit home, responds barely intelligibly: 'Yeah' [also nodding yes to show his consent.] 'We're ready to inject in your right arm. Okay? Okey-dokey.'"18 "Okey-dokey" were the last words Tom heard before he died. The ethics of euthanasia aside, the symbolic impoverishment to which Brueggemann refers is captured by Kevorkian's anemic and clinical "okey-dokey."

According to Brueggemann, the proper idiom to cut through this numbness in the face of death "is the language of grief." Grief "is the most visceral announcement that things are not right." C.K., letting himself be overcome by sadness, was onto something. The distracted self is not "okey-dokey," but sick with despair. Again, Percy's protagonist provides illumination: "Am I," he asks, "in my search, a hundred miles ahead of my fellow Americans or a hundred miles behind them? That is to say: Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them?"19 For Brueggemann, this searcher, this person who senses that something is amiss and experiences the pathos of "time out-of-joint," is a prophet. For West, this person is a blues man or woman.

#### BLUES SENSIBILITY

To understand a blues sensibility, some brief historical context is in order. The blues sensibility and the art that flowed from it emerged out of the genocide and horror of human slavery. "For blacks," James Cone explains,

the auction block was one potent symbol of their subhuman status. The block stood for "brokenness," because on sale days no family ties were recognized. "My brothers and sisters were bid off first, and one by one," recalled Josiah Henson, "while my mother, paralyzed by grief, held me by the hand." Black slaves were condemned to live in a society where not only the government but "God" condoned their slavery.<sup>20</sup>

Spirituals and blues music "were created out of that environment."<sup>21</sup>

"When white people enslaved Africans," Cone explains, "their intention was to dehistoricize black existence, to foreclose the possibility of a future defined by the African heritage." The blues tradition, notes Cone, is evidence that this plan did not succeed: "Black people did not stand passively by while white oppressors demoralized their being."<sup>22</sup>

A blues sensibility, West explains, "is about resistance, [it's] about overcoming, it's about prevailing, it's about persisting, but because it's tragic-comic, there's no triumph, as it were."<sup>23</sup> Where the despairing aesthete retreats into to the comedic or trivial, a blues sensibility squarely faces the tragic and the profound. A blues-inflected person faces the catastrophic that is everywhere and responds to it with compassion. W.E.B. Dubois illuminates further: "Through all of the sorry of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope — a faith in the ultimate justice of things."<sup>24</sup> A blues sensibility entails a "sense that no matter how mendacious elites may be, they can never extinguish the forces for good in the world."<sup>25</sup>

Yet the blues, says West, is about acknowledging your wounds, recognizing the truth about your bruises and scars. Through this process you “come up with new energy, a new name, a new song, and most importantly what sits at the center of the blues, finding your voice.”<sup>26</sup> By contrast, the despairing aesthete runs from the self and is often only an echo of the crowd. West points out that if you “are just going to be an echo then you cannot sing the blues. You better find your voice, which means come to terms with your own wounds and scars” (WCA).

The blues, Toni Morrison elaborates further, do not whine, which would suggest a lack of agency. Rather, even when it is “begging to be understood in the lyrics, [blues] music contradicts that feeling of being a complete victim and completely taken over.”<sup>27</sup> A sense of agency endures, “even when someone has broken your heart” (WCA).

Blues artists like B.B. King, West explains, touch “your soul and [allow] you to keep on keeping on” (WCA). It is a deep tradition, “a love train.” It is, contends West, the “richest tradition in the modern world because right now everyone is dealing with a catastrophe.... everybody has to come to terms with the blues.... you gonna have to learn to live with it, or you are gonna go crazy.... you are going to need some blues music to deal with your blues condition” (WCA).

The blues men and women “sing of real life here-and-now experiences of tragedy and comedy even as they offer up help. They offer strategies for survival. They offer us coping skills. They get us dancing and laughing, rapping and exposing the hypocrisy of a soulless and sanitized nation.”<sup>28</sup> Counter to the despair of possibility that detaches from reality, taking flight into abstraction, fantasy, or delusion, a blues sensibility is grounded in the grim circumstances and necessities of life. And yet, while facing the catastrophes of life, the blues man and woman is able somehow to resist the despair of necessity, the hopelessness of Dostoevsky’s ridiculous man.

America, notes West, is “not a blues nation.” Recalling Brueggemann, America is a land of denial, where pain and death are sanitized. It is an adolescent nation, and the blues is for grown-ups. “That’s why,” West notes, “there is no blues prodigy. Can’t be a blues prodigy; can’t sing the blues at 4 because you do not know what the hell you are signing about.... You are going to have to suffer in order to sing the blues” (WCA).

What is most extraordinary and inexplicable about a blues sensibility is the hope and agency that emerges out of suffering. The blues, West explains, “produces prisoners of hope, and when you are a prisoner of hope, you look at all the evidence against you, and say I am going to keep keeping on anyway, keep smiling, keep loving, keep laughing, keep organizing ... all they can do is kill me and when they kill me they can’t kill the blues. It passes on — it is a tradition” (WCA).

#### MAYA ANGELOU’S BLUES

An illustration of this movement from despair to hope is powerfully illustrated in Maya Angelou’s account of her eighth grade graduation from Lafayette County Training School in 1940.<sup>29</sup> Her graduation day began with excitement, hope, and great family pride at her accomplishment and optimism about her future. Angelou’s

pride, however, was soon dashed by her graduation speaker, Edward Donleavy, the white superintendent. Donleavy, because of his busy schedule, had to arrive late and leave early. As a consequence, he disrupted the flow and rhythm of the ceremony. The students were just getting ready to sing "The Negro National Anthem" when they were hushed and motioned to sit down as Superintendent Donleavy had just arrived and made his way onto the stage.

Mr. Donleavy began by informing the audience of the wonderful changes that were in store for Lafayette, changes that were already in place at Central High School, the white school, where the latest technology for the science labs was in place and a well-known artist from Little Rock was coming to teach the Central kids art.

Mr. Donleavy then noted approvingly that "one of the first-line football tacklers at Arkansas Agricultural and Mechanical College had graduated from good old Lafayette County Training School" (*Caged Bird*, 179). As he spoke Maya's thoughts began to sink: "The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren't even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owens and Joe Louises" (*Caged Bird*, 180). "The man's dead words," Angelou says, "fell like bricks around the auditorium and too many settled in my belly" (*Caged Bird*, 180). Looking left and right she noticed that the class of 1940 had their heads down. "We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous" (*Caged Bird*, 180). The speaker then left as hastily as he arrived, but the damage was done, and it left its mark on Angelou's heart.

Her thoughts then fully succumbed to despair. She writes,

Then I wished that Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner had killed all whitefolks in their beds and that Abraham Lincoln had been assassinated before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, and that Harriet Tubman had been killed by that blow on her head and Christopher Columbus had drowned in the *Santa Maria*.

It was awful to be a Negro and have no control over my life. It was brutal to be young and already trained to sit quietly and listen to charges brought against my color with no chance of defense. We should all be dead. I thought I should like to see us all dead, one on top of the other. A pyramid of flesh with the whitefolks on the bottom, as the broad base, then the Indians with their silly tomahawks and teepees and wigwams and treaties, the Negroes with their mops and recipes and cotton sacks and spirituals sticking out of their mouths. (*Caged Bird*, 181)

Given over to the despair of necessity, of total resignation, Angelou's thoughts took a nihilistic turn. Instead of hope for her future, she wanted no future for herself or anyone.

With her thoughts swirling in this abyss, she describes how her "name had lost its ring of familiarity," as she had "to be nudged to go and receive [her] diploma" (*Caged Bird*, 181). Going up, she says, "I neither marched up to the stage like a conquering Amazon, nor did I look in the audience for Bailey's nod of approval." The unfamiliarity of her name was particularly striking. Overcome by a nihilistic despair, Angelou lost her identity, lost her self. She was, as she says, neither a "conquering Amazon," nor a member of a proud family committed to education.

The class valedictorian, Henry Reed, then went up to give his speech. Angelou sat “silently rebutting each sentence,” angry that Henry had not heard the message that there was no future for the Negro race. Then something happened:

there was a hush, which in an audience warns that something unplanned is happening. I looked up and saw Henry Reed, the conservative, the proper, the A student, turn his back to the audience and turn to us (the proud graduating class of 1940) and sing, nearly speaking [the Negro National Anthem],

Lift ev'ry voice and sing.  
Till earth and heaven ring  
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;  
.....  
Stony the road we trod  
Bitter the chastening rod  
Felt in the days when hope, unborn, had died;  
Yet with a steady beat  
Have not our weary feet  
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed? (*Caged Bird*, 182)

Singing the Anthem was a routine part of the ritual assembly when the school gathered. Superintendent Donleavy's bluster had dislodged it from its original place in the program and now Henry Reed was restoring it to its rightful place.

Angelou had heard the Anthem and sung it countless times, but this time she heard it as if for the first time. Deeply moved, she reflects, “we were on top again. As always, again. We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls. I was no longer simply a member of the proud graduating class of 1940; I was a proud member of the wonderful, beautiful Negro race” (*Caged Bird*, 184). In that moment, Angelou's self was reconstituted and her identity reclaimed. She reconnected with her blues tradition, catalyzed by blues music and rituals. She reflects, “Oh, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the lonely nights made less lonely by your songs, or the empty pots made less tragic by your tales?” (*Caged Bird*, 184).

The blues arts, for Angelou, were not just amusing or entertaining, but edifying, which is to say, they help build up her self and elevate her soul. They reminded her of who she is. What is striking, as well, is how all of this happened within a matter of minutes. The self, as Kierkegaard underscores, is always in flux — always becoming or unbecoming. Maintaining the right synthesis of possibility and necessity is a constant task.

#### CONCLUSION

What might a blues pedagogy look like? The path to the blues, as West underscores, involves suffering. Hence, there are no blues prodigies. Given the importance of suffering, the idea of a blues pedagogy seems problematic as intentionally inflicting suffering is obviously out of the question. Suffering, however, is universal. What a blues pedagogy does offer are songs, stories, and lyrics that give expression and meaning to suffering and infuse it with a sense of hope and self-agency. Whether these categories are employed, though, is up to each individual. It requires subjective and arduous appropriation — the task of being a person. Though steeped in the blues



arts, Angelou reports that it was not until her graduation that she was able to finally hear “The Negro National Anthem.”

Two other points also stand out as key parts of a blues pedagogy: ritual and tradition. As Angelou notes we so easily forget who we are. And we so easily, as Kierkegaard diagnoses, default to an aesthetic modality. The wisdom of the blues has “been codified as myths, proverbs, clichés, bromides, epigrams, parables: the skeleton of every great story. The trick is keeping the truth up-front in daily consciousness.”<sup>30</sup> Rituals and liturgies are needed to help us remember who we are. As West says, we need blues music to help with our blues condition, and we need a steady supply of it.

To embrace and practice rituals, however, is to enter into a tradition. A blues sensibility requires trusting “a tradition in which to think, to judge, to live, because we discover that a tradition does exist, a collaborative achievement of coherent intellectual effort with a long history still accessible, that confirms our own experience of what we have found.”<sup>31</sup> The blues tradition that West invokes — the love train — comes alive in the eighth grade heart of Angelou. Pondering her tradition, Angelou muses, “If we were a people much given to revealing secrets, we might raise monuments and sacrifice to the memories of our poets, but slavery cured us of that weakness. It may be enough, however, to have it said that we survive in exact relationship to the dedication of our poets (include preachers, musicians and blues singers)” (*Caged Bird*, 184). Amen.

---

1. Louis C.K., interview by Conan O’Brien, *Conan*, September 20, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HbYScltflc>.

2. David Foster Wallace, “Deciderization 2007 — a Special Report,” in *The Best American Essays 2007* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007), <http://neugierig.org/content/dfw/bestamerican.pdf>, 1.

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition for Upbuilding and Awakening*, eds. Howard and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).

4. Blues sensibility is invoked in contrast to a blues mentality. Sensibility, more than a mentality or way of thinking, connotes a way of living that encompasses one’s emotions, moods, as well one’s physical and spiritual being.

5. Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, 18.

6. The unconscious version is captured in the robotic, saccharine happiness of the characters in *The Stepford Wives* or in the vain pursuits of those in *Mad Men*. They are blind to the futility of their pursuits. They are far removed from the awareness of Qoheleth, the wisdom writer of *Ecclesiastes*, who sees the vanity and emptiness in such endeavors.

7. Pascal references both tennis and geometry as ways to evade the task of becoming a self. His mention of geometry was a dig at Descartes’ disembodied project.

8. Carl Jung, *Word and Image*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 123. Jung defines neurosis as “a substitute for legitimate suffering.”

9. Kierkegaard’s anthropology envisions the self as an unstable mix of body and soul. Becoming a self, rather than negating one half over the other (i.e., materialism or Platonism), requires a synthesis of both. Echoing Pascal, Kierkegaard sees human beings as half-angelic and half-beast (*Pensées* #329). Selfhood requires integrating both. This is Kierkegaard’s starting assumption, which a materialist, arguably, can dismiss, embracing a view that talk of the self is a mere chimera. Through this lens, the self is nothing other than a material conglomeration that consciously and unconsciously seeks to fulfill desires.

10. Lourdes Garcia-Navarro, “In Brazil Nips and Tucks Do Not Raise an Eyebrow,” *National Public Radio*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/parallels/2014/10/07/353270270/an-uplifting-story-brazils-obsession-with-plastic-surgery>.



11. Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man," in *The Short Stories of Dostoevsky*, ed. William Phillips (New York: The Dial Press, 1946), 594.
12. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (First Vintage International, 1998), 13.
13. Cornel West, "Democracy Matters" (lecture, Washington University, St. Louis, MO, February 2, 2006), quoted in Mandy Silver, "Cornel West Delivers 'Inspiring' Lecture," *Student Life*, February, 2006, <http://www.studlife.com/archives/News/2006/02/03/CornelWestdeliversinspiringlecture/>.
14. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2d. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).
15. Charles Taylor, "The Sting of Death," *Commonweal*, October 2007, 14–15.
16. Brueggemann, *Prophetic*, 41.
17. Ibid.
18. Jack Kevorkian, interviewed by Mike Wallace, *60 Minutes*, CBS News, November 1998. The dialogue between Kevorkian and Youk is transcribed from a video that was included in the CBS broadcast of Mike Wallace's interview of Kevorkian. The description of Youk in the quoted dialogue is also transcribed from the CBS broadcast.
19. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 14.
20. James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 21.
21. Ibid., 24.
22. Ibid.
23. Cornel West, interviewed by Wexner Center for the Arts, November 5, 2013, <http://wexarts.org/blog/dr-cornel-west-blues>. This interview will be cited as WCA in the text for all subsequent references.
24. W.E.B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Fawcett Publications, 1961), 189.
25. Toni Morrison and Cornel West, "Blues, Love and Politics," *Nation* 278, no. 20 (May 24, 2004), 18–28.
26. Morrison and West, "Blues, Love, and Politics," 19.
27. Ibid.
28. Cornel West, *Brother West: Living Loving Out Loud: A Memoir* (New York: Smiley Books, 2010), 5.
29. Maya Angelou, "Graduation," *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. (New York: Random House, 1997). This work will be cited as *Caged Bird* in the text for all subsequent references.
30. David Foster Wallace's, "This Is Water," (commencement address, Kenyon College, Gambier Ohio, May 21, 2005), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKYJVV7HuZw>
31. Wendy Beckett, *In the Light of Christ: Writings in the Western Tradition* (Chicago: Ignatius Press, 2006), 7.