

Wangari Maathai (1940 – 2011)

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Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life support system. We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process to heal our own – indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder.

Wangari Maathai 2004¹

Wangari Maathai was an inspirational and courageous woman. A list of her achievements and numerous awards, including a Nobel Peace Prize, will attest to that, however more than her achievements; her life was full of purpose and reverence for all of life. She was born, the third of six children on 1 April 1940 in the village of Ithite in the central highlands of Kenya. She was raised by her family, with fellow Kikuyus in post-colonial Kenya at a time when her community and culture were adversely affected by colonial expansion. This colonial expansion resulted in the displacement of entire communities that were relocated to designated ‘native reserves,’ whilst their land was subdivided amongst European settlers.

Maathai acknowledged that she was someone who also benefited from the opportunities provided by a western model of education that was introduced by the colonial administration. In September 1960 she was chosen to be part of the Kennedy ‘Airlift,’ a program designed to educate East African leaders to meet the challenges of the coming independence. In January 1966 she received her MSc in Biology from the University of Pittsburgh. She returned to Kenya to continue her education, and in 1971 she became the first East African woman to receive a PhD, which she gained in Anatomy from the University College of Nairobi. Maathai married Mwangi Mathai and had three children, Waweru, Wanjiri and Muta. The marriage however lasted for just over 10 years as her former

¹ From Wangari Maathai’s Nobel Lecture after receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, Oslo, Norway. 10 December 2004, cited in Julia Stewart, *Stewart’s Quotable African Women*, (Penguin Books, South Africa, 2005): 57.

husband is known to have claimed that Maathai was, “too educated and too difficult to control.”²

The Green Belt Movement, established in the 1970s by Maathai is perhaps the most known example of her activism. Her idea to plant trees came from her understanding of the issues facing rural women with the introduction of cash crops such as coffee and tea for export. Large tracts of land were being cleared to the detriment of women farmers who could no longer grow food for their families or access firewood, which was their main energy source. Quite simply by planting trees, Maathai recognised that you could provide firewood and improve the soil to grow food, all of which would assist in breaking the cycle of poverty. The results of this idea were encouraging to say the least and decades later, Green Belt communities have planted over 45 million trees;³ six thousand tree nurseries have been created and over one hundred thousand people have been employed.² Not only did the Green Belt Movement lead to tangible outcomes, but it also encouraged women to take control of their lives and the movement became a political force, which resulted in some conflict with the Kenyan Government.

Not to be deterred, Maathai continued throughout her lifetime to raise consciousness amongst her fellow citizens and upheld the values of respect for all life. Maathai’s lifelong devotion to environmental and human rights was recognised through the many awards she received in her lifetime, including the Right Livelihood Award in 1984 and the most prestigious honour of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. All of which were richly deserved by a woman of great humanity.

For further reading see - Maathai Wangari, *Unbowed: A Memoir*, (Albert A. Knopf, New York, 2006).

² From “Wangari Maathai Biography,” in *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2011, <http://www.notablebiographies.com/news/Li-Ou/Maathai-Wangari.html> (accessed 7 October 2011).

³ The Green Belt Movement, <http://greenbeltmovement.org/w.php?id=13> (accessed 8 October 2011).