

Wangari Maathai:

A Tribute to Her Life & Works

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Wangari Maathai was a very bright comet who blazed across our sky. Burning within our midst for too short a time, she cycled out on the solstice year when the moon was closest to the earth. Perhaps the moon did turn green that day, mirroring the earth that became green with her women's groups restoring trees to Africa.

Kayaddah Shatten, the Princess of the Kwakiutls of Vancouver Island, noted:

"In 2010 the winter solstice fell on the same day as a full lunar eclipse for the first time in 456 years. The last time a full lunar eclipse coincided with the winter solstice was in AD 1554. The symbolic implication of this rare winter solstice/lunar eclipse merge suggests a strong cycle and potential for a "clearing away," a "letting go" of our emotional impediments to clarity and peace. The psyche will instinctively search for and resort to the pure concept of Love vs Fear.

This new cycle heralded by the solstice-eclipse can be the beginning of a life-changing chapter in many lives, marking dramatically new personal directions - directions that, if embraced, can bring harmony and synthesis to the intellect and soul." This is the cycle Wangari chose, on the autumnal equinox as a message for her leave-taking. She leaves behind her symbols: courage, boldness, analysis, love for and faith in the women of Africa including those in poverty.

Wangari no doubt was watching this eclipse from Kenya as we were from the US. We were watching together. "Sister," as she called me – and so many thousands of others – on the many occasions where we worked together toward a better environment for the world, "Sister, we have to win and we will win." We had the exact same vision. To heal all the degraded areas around the Earth. We certainly needed a lot of help to move forward. Yet as we talked in her hotel room that morning in London on my birthday on June 1, 1982, we realized we had a great deal of the same problems, obstacles, goals and accomplishments. She wanted to know how I did this and whether her group could also do this in Kenya. We met many, many times after, always joined by many people, and events. Mustafa Tolba and others brought me to Kenya. We were at the Earth Conference at Rio and at Yale during her year there.

Wangari was born on April 1, 1940 in Nyeri, Kenya while England was at war. After excelling as a child in school she obtained a scholarship to a school in the US at St Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas, where she earned a BS in 1964. She came to love this new country, its people and their democratic ways. She then earned her MS in Biological Sciences from the University of Pittsburgh in 1966, and later became the first woman in east and central Africa to earn a Ph.D. Becoming chair of the



Wangari Muta Maathai (1940-2011)

Department of Veterinary Anatomy in 1977 in Kenya and an associate professor in 1976, she once more set records as the first woman to attain those positions in the region. Wangari Maathai was active in the National Council of Women of Kenya in 1976-87, and was its chair in 1981-87. While she served on the National Council of Women, she introduced the idea of planting trees, ideas she brought with her from her time in the States to the women of Kenya who were the wood-gatherers in 1976, and continued to develop it into the Green Belt Movement. Rather than continue to find fuel in naturally-occurring forests, they would plant and sustain their own plantations for wood to cook for their families. She went on to expand this all over east and then all of Africa and south-east Asia.

Among Wangari's stunning achievements:

- She founded a grassroots organization to engage women's groups in the planting of trees, teaching them the processes of seed collection, germination, and nurserying seedlings to plant in order to conserve the environment from forest destruction for fuel and improve their quality of life by having trees for fuel and fodder. Women of the Green Belt Movement have now planted over 20 million trees on their farms and in schools, in their communities and church compounds. Wangari saw the problem: wholesale destruction of forests, their biodiversity, their services to the people, the lack of knowledge of the stakeholders. She saw the solution: grassroots restoration of the forests by the women stakeholders imparting knowledge, methods, support, and giving these poor women a voice at the table.
- In 1986, established a Pan African Green Belt Network that has exposed people from other African countries to the approach, successfully launching such initiatives in Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Lesotho, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and elsewhere, passing important and simple information about planting trees to sustain biodiversity and forests to those forest stakeholders in poverty.
- In September 1998, launched a campaign of the Jubilee 2000 Coalition to push for debt forgiveness for highly indebted African countries.
- Her campaign against land-grabbing and rapacious allocation of forest land has caught the limelight in the recent past. Partly as a

result, in December 2002, Professor Maathai was elected to Parliament with an overwhelming 98% of the vote.

- She was subsequently appointed by the President as Assistant Minister for the Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife in Kenya's ninth parliament, where she was able to get new protective forest and wildlife measures in place for Kenya.

Wangari Maathai is internationally recognized for her persistent struggle for the intersection of where democracy, human rights and environmental conservation meet. She won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2005 from the Norwegian Nobel Peace Committee, an innovation of great significance from a committee that generally bestows the Peace Prize on men who foster peace within a governmental or intergovernmental context. She has addressed the UN on several occasions and spoke on behalf of women at special sessions of the General Assembly for the five-year review of the Rio Earth Summit. She served on the Commission for Global Governance and Commission on the Future, and has been a member of the Club of Rome since 2003. Professor Maathai also served on the boards of several organizations including the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Disarmament, Women and Environment Development Organization (WEDO), World Learning for International Development, Green Cross International, the Jane Goodall Institute, Environment Liaison Center International, the Worldwide Network of Women in Environmental Work and the National Council of Women of Kenya..

But Wangari was a woman, a mother, and a friend whose radiant smile and warmth made her not just respected and admired, but loved. During the Earth Summit in 1992, she made the monumental decision that her environmental work could not succeed without being joined to a popular political force; and so she decided to mobilize her Green Belt movement for the transformational change of her country. She determined to work not only for the environment, but for women's rights, and for human rights. It was a frightening prospect that carried great personal risk – and she knew it. "Pray for me!" she told her many sisters. But she boldly went forward. Later, when arrested and jailed for her courageous activism, the same band of sisters [Joan Martin-Brown, Bella Abzug, Claudine Schiender and Jane Pratt] got the US Congress to pass a



The GBM team show their certificates after a training.

resolution putting Kenya's dictator on notice that US foreign aid would stop if Wangari was killed, or harmed in any way. She was released, and went on to do what she had set out to do: change her world, and in so doing, make a better Earth, and a better world for all of us.

Wangari's comet blazed outward into the Universe far too soon, but with a message to us who remain about life's fragility and the need to serve the causes you deeply believe in while you can.

Wangari is an African sister in soul to the quintessentially American sustainability author Donella Meadows, who was the writer of *Limits to Growth* exactly 40 years ago, launched by Aurelio Peccei and Alexander King at the Stockholm Conference on the Environment, and whose writings have taught the Club of Rome many lessons found in these documents, although Dana also blazed out far too soon.

For more updated biographical information, see:

The Green Belt Movement and Professor Wangari Maathai are featured in several publications including *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach* (by Professor Wangari Maathai, 2002), *Speak Truth to Power* (Kerry Kennedy Cuomo, 2000), *Women Pioneers for the Environment* (Mary Joy Breton, 1998), *Hope's Edge: The Next Diet for a Small Planet* (Frances Moore Lappé and Anna Lappé, 2002), *Una Sola Terra: Donna I Medi Ambient Despres de Rio* (Brice Lalonde et al., 1998), *Land Ist Leben* (Bedrohte Volker, 1993). **J.S.**

Anitra Thorhaug, Ph.D. is a member of the Club of Rome and D. Jane Pratt, Ph.D. is a member of the US Club of Rome.

Honor for the Green Belt Movement

Wangari Maatai and the Green Belt Movement have received numerous awards, most notably the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. Others include The Sophie Prize (2004), Petra Kelly Prize for Environment (2004), Goldman Environmental Prize (1991), Conservation Scientist Award (2004), J. Sterling Morton Award (2004), WANGO Environment Award (2003), Outstanding Vision and Commitment Award (2002), Excellence Award from the Kenyan Community Abroad (2001), Golden Ark Award (1994), Juliet Hollister Award (2001), Earth Trustee award (1999), Jane Adams Leadership Award (1993), Edinburgh Medal

(1993), The Hunger Project's Africa Prize for Leadership (1991), Woman of the World (1989), Windstar Award for the Environment (1988), Better World Society Award (1986), Right Livelihood Award (1984) and Woman of the Year Award (1983). Professor Maathai is also listed in UNEP's Global 500 Hall of Fame and was named one of the 100 heroines of the world. She has also received honorary doctoral degrees from several institutions around the world: William's College, MA, US (1990), Hobart & William Smith Colleges (1994), University of Norway (1997), and Yale University (2004).



The 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate