

## Wangari Muta Maathai 1940–2011

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Two years ago we published in the December 2009 issue of this journal an obituary of the Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Norman Borlaug, a man who, as father of the Green Revolution, was reputed to have saved more lives than anyone in the history of the world. Again, in this December issue of the journal, we are saddened to publish an obituary of yet another Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Wangari Maathi, founder of the Green Belt Movement and fearless champion of the poor and the environment.

Wangari Muta Maathai was born in the village of Ithite, near Nyeri, in the Central Highlands of Kenya on April 1, 1940. With the encouragement of her elder brother, Nderitu, she went to Loreto Girls' High School, graduating in 1959. The following year, she won a scholarship from the African American Students Foundation to study biology at Mount St. Scholastica College (now Benedictine College) in Atchison, Kansas and was awarded her degree in 1964. She followed this by earning an M.S. (Master of Science) degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1966. Further studies in Germany and Nairobi led to her being awarded the Ph.D. degree of the University of Nairobi in Veterinary Anatomy in 1971, the first woman in East or Central Africa to hold such a degree. We gather from written materials, Wangari had other firsts, such as becoming Chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and an Associate Professor of the University of Nairobi in 1976 and 1977, respectively. It was

in 1976 that she became active in the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) and was its chairman from 1981 to 1987. During this time she established the Green Belt Movement and, to date, this organization has assisted women in planting more than 47 million trees in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Ethiopia and Zimbabwe. In 1991 she won the Africa Prize for helping to eradicate hunger and in 2004 she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution to sustainable development, democracy and peace. Wangari died of cancer on Sunday 25th September in a Nairobi hospital and is survived by her three children Waweru, Wanjira, and Muta, and her granddaughter Ruth Wangari.

*So much for the bare bones of Wangari's life, but what was it about this remarkable person who achieved so much in spite of so many obstacles that were put in her path?*

One clue lies in the region where she grew up - a coffee-growing area in the Central Highlands of Kenya. As a child she recalled watching the destruction of the wild life and flora around her home to make way for commercial plantations of the crop. Through her work in the NCWK, this impression of deteriorating environmental conditions was confirmed. In addition, she learned how this degradation affected poor, rural Kenyans—especially women. They told her that they lacked firewood for cooking and heating, that clean water was scarce and nutritious food was limited. Wangari suggested that planting trees would mitigate the situation as, in addition to providing wood for cooking and heating, the trees would supply material for fencing and fodder for livestock. Furthermore, they would improve agriculture by protecting watersheds and stabilizing the soil. The Green Belt Movement was born!

Another clue lies in her personal philosophy which may be gleaned from her writings: "In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground - a time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time

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is now.” And a further quotation of particular relevance to this journal, “The people are starving. They need food; they need medicine; they need education. They do not need a skyscraper to house the ruling party and a 24-hour TV station.”

Of course, such forthrightness did not go down well in some quarters, particularly with the not so progressive government of Daniel arap Moi, who, during the 1980s, considered the Green Belt Movement “subversive”. The skyscraper in question was destined to be built on the green space of the Uhuru Park in central Nairobi. Wangari campaigned against it and, although her protest was violently broken up, she was successful and foreign investors withdrew their money.

While Moi was still in power, Wangari suffered beatings, whippings, death threats and spells in prison. In one episode in 1999, after leading a protest against secret land deals by the government, Wangari was beaten so severely by the police that she was hospitalised. On another occasion, in 2001, again involving an illegal land deal in a village near Mount Kenya, the police hijacked her Land Rover, drove her to prison and locked her in a cell. This time, in response to international outcry, she was released without charge.

In 2002, after 24 years in power, Moi was ousted by Mwai Kibaki and Wangari was elected Member of Parliament for Tetu, a constituency close to where she grew up. The following year, Kibaki appointed her Deputy Minister for the Environment. In this capacity, she emphasized reforestation, forest protection and the restoration of degraded land. She was also active in social issues which included educational initiatives, scholarships for children orphaned by HIV/AIDS and improved nutrition for those living with the disease.

Wangari’s increasing presence on the political scene is explained by her realization that the root causes of poverty and environmental destruction were bad governance, lack of empowerment and loss of cultural values that had previously enabled communities to sustain their land and livelihoods. Thus, the simple but effective policy of planting of trees prompted her to embrace a more extensive social, economic and environmental agenda.

In 2005 Wangari became presiding officer of the African Union’s Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) and, after the violence of the 2007 Kenyan elections, she was mediator and a critical voice for peace, accountability and justice. Together with the Green Belt Movement she helped to ensure that the new Kenyan constitution, which was ratified by a public vote in 2010, included the right of all citizens to a clean and healthy environment, and that the constitution’s drafting was truly consultative. In 2010 and in partnership with the University of Nairobi, she established the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies (WMI). The aim of this institute is to bring together academics and people working at the grass roots level to exchange knowledge and experiences of the linkages between livelihoods and ecosystems.

Wangari was appointed as Goodwill Ambassador for the Congo Basin rainforest in 2005 and the following year she joined the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). In 2007 she became co-chair with former Canadian Prime Minister, Paul Martin, of the Congo Basin Forest Fund.

Not surprisingly, in addition to the award of the Africa Prize in 1991 and the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, Wangari was the recipient of numerous awards from governments and institutions around the World. These included the Order of the Rising Sun (Japan, 2009), the Legion D’Honneur (France, 2006), Elder of the Golden Heart and Elder of the Burning Spear (Kenya, 2004, 2003), the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights (2007), the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights Lifetime Achievement Award (2006), the Right Livelihood Award (1984); and honorary doctorates from Yale University and Morehouse College in the U.S., Ochanomizu University in Japan and the University of Norway.

As expressed in the Green Belt Movement’s website <[www.greenbeltmovement.org](http://www.greenbeltmovement.org)>, Wangari documented her life, work, and perspectives in four books: **The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience** (2003), which charts the organization’s development and methods; **Unbowed** (2006), her autobiography; **The Challenge for Africa** (2008), which examines the social, economic, and political bottlenecks that have held back the continent’s development, and provides a manifesto for change; and **Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World** (2010), which explores the values that underpin the Green Belt Movement and suggests how they can be applied.

As neither of us had the good fortune to know Professor Maathai on a personal level, we feel inadequate to state clearly the source of her motivation and drive so perhaps the last words should be left to Wangari herself, “We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk!”



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