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Dear Reader,

What difference can one person make? I have heard this question many times when discussing the huge challenges we face in terms of the climate, the environment and society. But powerlessness is a choice. We can elect to look into the future through two lenses: hope or fear. This month we're honoring a woman who chose hope, and acted on that belief. On September 25, 2011 Kenyan Nobel Peace Laureate, Dr. Wangari Muta Maathai, left this planet and left us with a lot to learn.

Enjoy the pause to read,

Isabel Rimanoczy  
Editor

#### Quote of the Month

*"You cannot protect the environment unless you empower people, you inform them, and you help them understand that these resources are their own, that they must protect them."*

Wangari Muta Maathai  
(1940 - 2011)



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## The Green Belt Movement<sup>[1]</sup>

**Honoring Wangari Muta Maathai**

*"Every person who has ever achieved anything has been knocked down many times. But all of them picked themselves up and kept going, and that is what I have always tried to do."*

Wangari Maathai was born in the village of Ithite, near Nyeri, in the Central Highlands of Kenya on April 1, 1940. At a time when most Kenyan girls were not educated, she went to school at the instigation of her elder brother, Nderitu. Principally taught by Catholic missionary nuns, she graduated from Loreto Girls' High School in 1959. The following year she came to the United States through a scholarship program of the African American Students Foundation—what became known as Kennedy "Airlift," because a Kennedy family foundation helped fund the effort. Professor Maathai studied at Mount St. Scholastica (now Benedictine College) in Atchison, Kansas, where she completed a bachelor's degree in biological sciences.

In 1966 she earned a master's degree at the University of Pittsburgh. That year she returned to a newly independent Kenya, and soon after joined the School of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Nairobi. In 1971 she received a Ph.D., the first woman in east and central Africa to do so. She became the first woman to chair a department at the University and the first to be appointed a professor.

In the 1970s Professor Maathai became active in a number of environmental and humanitarian organizations in Nairobi, including the National Council of Women of Kenya. Through her work representing women academics, she spoke to rural women and learned from them about the deteriorating environmental and social conditions affecting poor, rural Kenyans—especially women. The women told her that they lacked firewood for cooking and heating, that clean water was scarce, and nutritious food was limited.

Professor Maathai suggested to them that planting trees might be an answer. The trees would provide wood for cooking, fodder for livestock, and material for fencing; they would protect watersheds and stabilize the soil, improving agriculture. This was the beginning of the Green Belt Movement (GBM), which was formally established in 1977. GBM has since mobilized hundreds of thousands of women and men to plant more than 47 million trees, restoring degraded environments and improving the quality of life for people in poverty.

As GBM's work expanded, Professor Maathai realized that behind poverty and environmental destruction were deeper issues of disempowerment, bad governance, and a loss of the values that had enabled communities to sustain their land and livelihoods, and what was best in their cultures. The planting of trees became an entry-point for a larger social, economic, and environmental agenda.

In the 1980s and 1990s the Green Belt Movement joined with other pro-democracy advocates to press for an end to the abuses of the dictatorial regime of then Kenyan president Daniel arap Moi. She initiated campaigns that halted the construction of a skyscraper in Uhuru ("Freedom") Park in downtown Nairobi, and stopped the grabbing of public land in Karura Forest, just north of the city center. She also helped lead a yearlong vigil with the mothers of political prisoners that resulted in freedom for 51 men held by the government.

As a consequence of these and other advocacy efforts, Professor Maathai and GBM staff and colleagues were repeatedly beaten, jailed, harassed, and publicly vilified by the Moi regime. Professor Maathai's fearlessness and persistence resulted in her becoming one of the best-known and most respected women in Kenya. Internationally, she also gained recognition for her courageous stand for the rights of people and the environment.

Professor Maathai's commitment to a democratic Kenya never faltered. In December 2002, in the first free-and-fair elections in her country for a generation, she was elected as Member of Parliament for Tetu, a constituency close to where she grew up. In 2003 President Mwai Kibaki appointed her Deputy Minister for the Environment in the new government. Professor Maathai brought GBM's strategy of grassroots empowerment and commitment to participatory, transparent governance to the Ministry of Environment and the management of Tetu's constituency development fund. She emphasized reforestation, forest protection, and the restoration of degraded land; education initiatives, including scholarships for those orphaned by HIV/AIDS; and expanded access to voluntary counseling and testing as well as improved nutrition for those living with HIV/AIDS.

In the violence that followed the contested 2007 Kenyan elections, Professor Maathai served as a mediator and a critical voice for peace, accountability, and justice. In addition, she was instrumental in ensuring that the new Kenyan constitution, 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 2004 Professor Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her work for sustainable development, democracy, and peace—the first African woman and the first environmentalist to receive this honor. In announcing the award, the Norwegian Nobel Committee praised the "holistic approach" of her work and called her "a strong voice speaking for the best forces in Africa to promote peace and good living conditions on that continent."

In 2006 Professor Maathai co-founded the **Nobel Women's Initiative** with five of her fellow women peace laureates to advocate for justice, equality, and peace worldwide.

In recent years Professor Maathai played an increasingly important role in global efforts to address climate change, specifically by advocating for the protection of indigenous forests and the inclusion of civil society in policy decisions. In 2005 ten Central African governments appointed her the goodwill ambassador for the Congo Basin.

In 2006 Professor Maathai joined with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) to launch a campaign to plant a billion trees around the world. That goal was met in less than a year; the target now stands at 14 billion. In 2009 she was designated a United Nations messenger of peace by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

In 2010, she established the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies. The Institute brings together academic research—e.g. in land use, forestry, agriculture, resource-based conflicts, and peace studies—with the Green Belt Movement approach and members of the organization. Through sharing their experiences, academics and those working at the grassroots learn from and educate each other about the linkages between livelihoods and ecosystems.

Professor Maathai 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.

*"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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[1] Source: [GreenBeltMovement.org](http://GreenBeltMovement.org)



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