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Unbowed

Wangari Maathai

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"Unbowed"

Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize winner (1940- 2011)

Abstract. In her autobiography, the late Wangari Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement and Nobel Peace Prize winner, talks about the village where she spent her childhood. Through her very personal and beautiful testimonial, Wangari allows us to capture the whole cycle of life, how water, plants, food and livelihoods are interconnected.

"Collecting firewood for the household was a frequent activity and I would often help my mother do it. The country was dotted with hundreds of huge *mĩgumo*, or wild fig trees, their bark the color of elephant skin and thick, gnarled branches... When my mother told me to go and fetch firewood, she would warn me, "Don't pick any dry wood out of the fig tree, or even around it." "Why?" I would ask. "Because that's a tree of God," she'd reply. "We don't use it. We don't cut it. We don't burn it."...I later learned that there was a connection between the fig tree's root system and the underground water reservoirs. The roots burrowed deep into the ground, breaking through the rocks beneath the surface soil and diving into the underground water table.

About two hundred yards from the fig tree there was a stream named Kanungu, with water so clean and fresh that we drank it straight from the stream. As a child, I used to visit the point where the water bubbled up from the belly of the earth to form a stream...At the point where the stream came out of the ground, were planted arrowroots, and along the stream were banana plants, and sugarcane, which were typical food crops. Arrowroots, when cooked, provide a starchy tuber like potatoes, and grow only where there is a lot of water". Wangari describes the village of her childhood, years later: "I noticed that the rivers would rush down the hillsides and along paths and roads when it rained, and that they were muddy with silt... "That is soil erosion," I remember thinking to myself. I also observed that the cows were so skinny that I could count their ribs. There was little grass or other fodder for them to eat where they grazed, and during the dry season much of the grass lacked nutrients. The people, too, looked undernourished and poor and the vegetation in their fields was scanty. The soils in the fields weren't performing as they should because their nutrient value had been depleted. Around the village, commercial trees had replaced indigenous forest. I noticed that much of the land that had been covered by trees, bushes, and grasses when I was growing up had been replaced by tea and coffee. I also learned that someone had acquired the piece of land where the fig tree I was in awe of as a child had stood. The new owner perceived the tree to be a nuisance because it took up too much space and he felled it to make room to grow tea. By then I understood the connection between the tree and water, so it did not surprise me that when the fig tree was cut down, the stream where I had played with the tadpoles dried up. My children would never be able to play with the frogs' eggs as I had or simply to enjoy the cool, clear water of that stream. Ironically, the area where the fig tree of my childhood once stood always remained a patch of bare ground where nothing grew. It was as if the land rejected anything but the fig tree itself...

At a seminar organized by the NCWK, a woman researcher presented the results of a study she had done, which found that children in the central region of Kenya were suffering from diseases associated with malnutrition. This was an eye-opener for me, since that is where I come from and I knew from personal experience that the central region was one of the most fertile in Kenya. But times had changed. Many farmers had converted practically all of their land into growing coffee and tea to sell in the international market. Consequently, women were feeding their families processed foods like white bread, maize flour, and white rice, all of which are high in carbohydrates but relatively low in vitamins, proteins, and minerals. Cooking these foods consumed less energy than the foods I had eaten as a child, and this made them attractive and practical, because available firewood for cooking was limited due to deforestation in the region. This shortage of firewood, the researcher concluded, was leading directly to malnutrition as people's diets changed in response. The most vulnerable were children and the elderly."

Wangari Maathai was the founder of the Green Belt Movement and the first woman to earn a doctorate in biology in East Africa. A recipient of numerous awards for her work on environmental and social issues, in 2004, she was honored with the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2006, she published her memoir, Unbowed. She was also the author of Challenge for Africa andReplenishing the Earth. She lived in Nairobi, Kenya. To learn more about Wangari Maathai and her work, visit the Green Belt Movement website: www.gbmna.org

Wangari Maathai, "Unbowed: A Memoir", Knopf Publishing Group (2006)
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