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Righteous Commitment: Renewing, Repairing, and Restoring the World—Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

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RIGHTEOUS COMMITMENT: RENEWING, REPAIRING, AND RESTORING THE WORLD—WANGARI MAATHAI AND THE GREEN BELT MOVEMENT

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

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In

ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION

By

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Chicago, Illinois

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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, heal our own . . . 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 is now.”

-Wangari Maathai’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, 2004
Trees

“Africans know they depend on trees for firewood . . . Every big tree has a spirit. Some trees house many spirits. Whether a tree is a spirit or is inhabited by a spirit is not an easy question. The people will say: The tree has a spirit, or: in the tree there is a spirit. The spirit has a voice, which the careful listener can hear and even understand if he knows the language of the spirits. This voice has to be preserved carefully by the drum maker. The boat-maker too, wants to keep the spirit of the tree in the wood so that it will protect the boatman against drowning in the treacherous rivers, when the tree has become a boat. The appearance changes, the spirit remains. Together in a forest, the trees have a collective spirit, powerful enough to be revered as a god” (http://www.a-gallery.de/docs/mythology.htm).

“Perhaps one might ask what tree planting has to do with liberation. Planting a tree is the first step toward liberation—reclaiming one’s own” (Colin 2007).
Abstract

This Africentric historical inquiry introduces Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize recipient and internationally renowned Kenyan activist, as a visionary adult educator and leader of the liberatory environmental movement - The Green Belt Movement. The Movement addresses decades of mis-education through culturally grounded adult education activities that help communities understand the linkages between environmental degradation and poor governance, and educate people to participate in democracy.

The study describes Maathai’s philosophy and how it informed her leadership of environmental, political, and social change. The African philosophical framework of Maat, and the principle of serudj-ta (repairing, renewing and restoring the world) provide a lens and conceptual grounding for understanding Maathai’s philosophy. Maathai’s message, that equitable and sustainable management of natural resources is inextricably bound with issues of governance and social justice, suggests the consciousness that allows exploitation and domination of people is the same consciousness that allows exploitation and domination of nature. Adult education is central to the Movement because of its role in helping people understand and address root causes of injustice, in all its forms.

Maathai’s success at mobilizing thousands of people at the grassroots, many marginalized, to both challenge oppressive systems and affect environmental change at the local level speaks to the power of culturally grounded adult education. The Movement employed adult education as a decolonization process and to foster the revitalization of indigenous culture, selfethnic identity, women’s empowerment, and participatory democracy. For adult educators and others concerned with the environment, Maathai’s work teaches us that we must not isolate our work in that domain from the larger, systemic and root causes of environmental problems.
Acknowledgements

This study owes thanks to many people. I would like to thank the following people in particular:

My mentor, research chair and teacher, Dr. Scipio A. J. Colin III~ Thank you for modeling Righteous Commitment and your embodiment of Maat. I know you understood my “magnificent obsession” in the deepest of ways. Thank you for seeing me, and leading me home.

My husband and family~ who have been my biggest fans and without whose love and support this would not have been possible.

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And most importantly, Professor Wangari Maathai, Wanjira Mathai, and the women and men of the Green Belt Movement for your courage, vision, tenacity, and all you have to teach us. This work is for you.
Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................................. 5

Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................. 6

Preface .................................................................................................................................. 11

Calling ................................................................................................................................. 11

Lived Experience ................................................................................................................. 11

Africanist Scholarship ....................................................................................................... 14

Introduction to the Green Belt Movement ........................................................................ 17

Chapter 1. Introduction to the Research ........................................................................ 20

Introduction ....................................................................................................................... 20

Purpose of the Study .......................................................................................................... 22

Statement and Background of the Problem ...................................................................... 23

Significance of the Study ................................................................................................... 24

Africentric Conceptual and Theoretical Framework ....................................................... 26

Africentrism ........................................................................................................................ 26

Philosophical Elements .................................................................................................... 30

Salient Concepts ................................................................................................................ 32

Theory ................................................................................................................................. 35

Research Questions .......................................................................................................... 39

Methodology ...................................................................................................................... 39

Data Collection and Analysis ......................................................................................... 40

Historical Data Collection ............................................................................................... 40

Role of Primary and Secondary Data Sources ............................................................... 41

Additional Data Sources .................................................................................................. 42
Chapter 4. Adult Education in the Green Belt Movement: Culture is Coded Wisdom

Introduction ................................................................................................................................................... 104

Sites of Liberatory Adult Education ...................................................................................................... 104

Tree Planting Program ................................................................................................................................. 105
Civic and Environmental Education ............................................................................................................. 108
Food Security and Water Harvesting Program ........................................................................................... 120
Pan African Network ........................................................................................................................................ 121
Advocacy .................................................................................................................................................... 123
Green Belt Safaris ......................................................................................................................................... 124

Chapter Summary ........................................................................................................................................ 125

Chapter 5. Righteous Leadership: Speak Truth to Power ...................................................................... 127

Introduction ................................................................................................................................................... 128

Righteous Commitment ................................................................................................................................. 129

Equality ....................................................................................................................................................... 131
Justice ............................................................................................................................................................ 137
Service .......................................................................................................................................................... 140

Righteous Leadership ................................................................................................................................... 141

Courage ...................................................................................................................................................... 142
Perseverance ............................................................................................................................................... 146
Preface

Calling

I was called to this research in a number of ways. I was first called through the voices of my ancestors. At the time I did not know what I was being called to, but have since come to understand it was to share the philosophy of the person I see as the most visionary adult educator of our time. I honor them and her with this work. I was next called through my struggles and the struggles of others in search of a deep understanding of justice. Lastly, in the spirit of Maat, I was called to reconcile the harm done in the name of white supremacy and colonialism.

When I answered the call, I was aware that my position and identity as a White North American scholar would inform my approach. This troubled me, as it inherently posed challenges to my commitments to agency, self-determination, and anti-racist work. It was my great fortune to meet Dr. Scipio A. J. Colin III and other Africentric scholars, both in print and in person, who introduced me Africology, Africentrism, and Africanist research. From my perspective, this is the only intellectual paradigm that should be used to study an African leader of an African (yet global) movement. Anything else would perpetuate intellectual racism. I have done my best to employ it and to add to this knowledge base.

This research brought me home to my source. This source, ancient Africa, is the source of all humanity and civilization. Wangari Maathai connects us to this source and carries the messages we need to hear in order to save ourselves and the planet we live on. May she and her work be an inspiration to us all.

Lived Experience

This is a qualitative research study grounded in the belief that knowledge and worldview
are socially constructed. By this I mean that we name our experience and interpret the world through language, culture, and social relations with others. A key assumption underlying this perspective is that research is not neutral and therefore it is naïve to assume impartiality. The subjectivity a researcher brings is reflected in the questions asked and the way data is collected and interpreted. Within this framework, subjectivity is not considered a detriment to validity or reliability; rather, it is an essential factor in how the research contributes to the knowledge base in a unique way. The goal of this kind of research is not to produce replicable truth claims but to deepen our understanding of the human experience. As a social scientist I seek to understand social phenomena and constructs, and thus I believe in lived experience as a primary and authentic source of knowledge. As a social scientist concerned with learning and growth, I am specifically interested in knowledge construction and processes of change.

The question of who a researcher is becomes relevant in qualitative research because it provides a context for understanding the interpretive frame from which the research is conducted. As an activist-scholar, one who believes that knowledge is not connected to credentials, I will share some components of my lived experience that have informed both my commitments and the lenses I look through as relevant to this research.

I have been involved in the practice of adult education within many different contexts: organizational innovation and reform, higher education leadership, nonprofit development, private sector training and consulting, public office, community development, Extension, and citizen activism. Within all of these settings I have approached adult education as a liberatory activity. By liberatory, I mean that my educational agenda has included a commitment to justice, not in the legal sense but in terms of freeing people from that which interferes with their well-being and growth. For me, a primary role of education is to foster agency so that people or
institutions can affect the change they want for themselves, their families, their communities, or their nations.

Broadly speaking I frame much of my work as community development. I understand community to be a group of people who share culture, perhaps history, as well as the built and natural environment relevant to that group. Place is an important concept to community, although I suggest that place can be defined in temporal as well as geo-spatial terms. Indeed, the Rediscovering Geography Committee of the National Research Council has espoused this view:

Geographers recognize that a “place” is defined not only by its internal characteristics but also by the flows of people, materials (e.g., manufactured goods, pollutants) and ideas from other places. These flows introduce interdependencies between places that can either reinforce or reduce differences. (1977, 30–31)

What is important for self-determination is that a community be able to define itself in its own terms. The work of community development has many dimensions and includes activities related to political, economic, physical, and social domains, all of which relate to some shared understanding of place.

Within the field of adult education, social movements have the potential to provide a structure for community development by bringing together people to learn and act in ways that improve the conditions or places they inhabit. Liberation movements do this by re-centering people in their own story, their own intellectual and cultural traditions, and their own meaning constructs. The field of adult education should be especially interested in liberation movements not only for what they have to teach us about the role of education in challenging racism and other forms of oppression, but also for how they can foster the reclamation of environment and place.
Africanist Scholarship

I approached this research as an Africanist scholar, and as such maintain a particular commitment to historical research. This is because the exclusion of African history from the literature and practice of the field has resulted in the perpetuation of intellectual and sociocultural racism. To be clear, I employ Colin’s definition of Africanist scholarship rather than the definition provided by Asante. Asante defines Africanists as “Europeans whose interest in Africa serves European studies” (Asante 1990, 6). In Colin’s view, an Africanist scholar centers her research within African conceptual and theoretical frameworks, but who cannot factor in lived experience as a component in the last layer of analysis (Colin 2007).

My interest in Africanist philosophy is first in how it can serve Africans and members of the African Diaspora. Further however, I am interested in how it can serve our broader global community. A central function of philosophy is that it be used to understand and address “problems that plague humanity as a whole” (W. E. B. Du Bois as cited in Rabaka 2003, 400). I believe that adult educators should keep at the fore the powerful, critical question posed by Du Bois: “How can we use the accumulated wisdom of the world for the development of full human power?” (1973, 10) Engaging with philosophies demands that we ask questions that help us explore the nature of reality, truth, knowledge, goodness, human nature, beauty, and being. It is the exploration and sharing of these meanings that contribute to the “wisdom of the world.” In the end, philosophy is not just about our ideals, beliefs, and values but also the application of those toward some higher purpose.

The primary organizing construct for analysis in this study was the ancient African moral and philosophical ideal of Maat. A full description of Maat is provided in chapter 3, but in short, it offers a philosophical orientation that addresses the complexity of relationships that form...
experience. The concept of *relationships* is central to my practice as an adult educator, and I use education as a means to help others explore and understand the relationships between different aspects of their lives. To take a simple example, teaching about drought involves teaching about the relationship between land use and the hydrologic cycle. Maathai’s belief that education must address root causes, and her understanding of how environmental and social injustices are related, speaks to the centrality of relationships in her philosophy. This perspective reflects Maatian consciousness or worldview: Applying Maat in daily life means striving to be in “right relationship” with both humans and the environment. This right relationship is one in which there is not domination or exploitation but rather reciprocity and balance. If one relationship is out of balance, they all are.

My commitment to and broad understanding of justice grows in part out of my Jewish heritage. Like Africans, Jews throughout history have experienced mass extermination and genocide, exile, race-based marginalization, enslavement, and Diaspora. Coming to understand this history and our survival stories have informed my commitments to fighting oppression. I couple this commitment to anti-racist work with the environment because I believe racism and environmental degradation stem from similar roots. While obviously different phenomena, both grow out of a Eurocentric worldview. I am certainly not the first person to recognize this problem, but I see a role for adult education in uncovering what in this worldview is harmful and in teaching towards something different. Susan Griffin shares a similar view:

> The awareness grows that something is terribly wrong with the practices of European culture that have led both to human suffering and environmental disaster. Patterns of destruction which are neither random nor accidental have arisen from a consciousness that fragments existence. The problem is philosophical. Not the dry, seemingly irrelevant, obscure or academic subject known by the name of philosophy. But philosophy as a structure of the mind that shapes all our days, all our perceptions. Within this particular culture to which I was born, a European culture transplanted to North America, and which has
grown into an oddly ephemeral kind of giant, and electronic behemoth, busily
feeding on the world, the prevailing habit of mind for over two thousand years, is
to consider human existence and above all human consciousness and spirit as
independent from and above nature, still dominates the public imagination, even
now withering the very source of our own sustenance. And although the shape of
social systems, or the shape of gender, the fear of homosexuality, the argument
for abortion, or what Edward Said calls the hierarchies of race, the prevalence of
violence, the idea of technological progress, the problem of failing economies
have been understood separately from the ecological issues, they are all part of the
same philosophical attitude which presently threatens the survival of life on earth.
(1995, 29)

Eurocentrism privileges some people over others and positions humans as superior over nature.
Two outcomes of this worldview have been the construction of race as a means to separate and
the exploitation of nature as a right or entitlement. In my view, exploitation and domination of
people and nature have gone hand in hand as Europeans and non-Native Americans have
colonized the world.

Typical of many North Americans, I was raised in and influenced by this Eurocentric and
Judeo-Christian worldview which values duality over holism. Within this worldview, humans
and nature are considered separate from each other, and the environment exists to provide for our
consumptive needs. Certainly these beliefs exist on a continuum and there are some who seek to
protect and conserve natural resources, but this has not been the dominant agenda. The problem
with duality is that it imposes limits on how we see ourselves in relation to the world and sets us
up to understand phenomena in binary ways. By making something “the other” we can more
easily distance ourselves from its suffering, degradation, or demise. Psychologically it is harder
to exploit, dominate, or do any kind of violence when one is aware of the consequences of those
actions. A problem for us as educators is that most educational ventures in the United States are
born out of this dualistic worldview. This has had significant impact on the construction of
curricula, approaches to instruction, and educational design.
Over time, I have come to embrace a worldview that recognizes both dualism and holism. This has been a function of my own growth and a deepening understanding of how humans and nature are connected. As an adult educator, I have brought human dimensions to conversations about the environment, and I have brought the environment to conversations of social change and human welfare. I do this because I understand how intimately the well being of humans is dependent on the well being of the environment, and visa versa. It is ironic that the answers to some of our most complex problems may rest within traditions marginalized in the march for industrial progress. Perhaps it is time to center those knowledge bases that have allowed people to live sustainably for centuries, and which can teach us about right relationship between humans and nature.

Introduction to the Green Belt Movement

I first heard of the Green Belt Movement while in Africa in the early 1990s. I was in Kenya at the time, traveling in rural areas. During a stop in Nairobi, I was introduced to a priest who told me about a tree planting campaign started by local women. This was shortly before the long overdue multiparty elections in 1992, and much national pride was on display. The priest took me to see some of the work being done in his parish, the Kibera slum of Nairobi, including trees planted by the Green Belt Movement.

Years later, I saw Wangari Maathai being interviewed on television. As she spoke, I recognized the activities she was describing were part of that tree planting I had learned about while in Kenya. In the interview she talked about the work she started with rural women in Kenya to address problems caused by deforestation. I was intrigued by how she described connections between democratic governance and sustainable care of the environment. I was also inspired by her educational approach: helping people understand the root causes of
environmental problems, then organizing and educating people to address them. In the interview she discussed how the tree planting campaign had grown into a multifaceted social and environmental movement that addressed human rights, peace, and sustainable management of natural resources. Like many others who see or hear her, I was profoundly taken by her wisdom, vision, and courage. Although she did not discuss adult education in the interview, I could surmise the central role it played in the work of the Movement. From that one interview, I determined she had a message of relevance to the field of adult education, as well as others committed to a just and sustainable world.

The success of the Green Belt Movement in affecting real environmental change as well as real political and social change suggested to me that there was something powerful in what she did and how she did it. I understood that her approach must be grounded in a philosophy that reflected values and principles that spoke to others. I could see that she addressed root causes of problems both in terms of structures but also in terms of agency. She did this by challenging political, economic, or gendered power systems while simultaneously teaching people to recognize and stand up for their rights.

What spoke to me most was the way in which she integrated environmental change with social and political change. In my experience many people who are engaged in environmental conservation and who care about sustainable management of natural resources isolate those efforts from the larger, systemic, and root causes of environmental problems. For the most part, humans cause these problems, and thus the only way to affect meaningful change is to address the sociocultural dimensions of environmental problems. As we know, this becomes a much more complex educational endeavor than simply teaching people how to plant trees, filter their water, or stop using pesticides.
Her approach also spoke to me in its amazing success at mobilizing thousands of people at the grassroots, many marginalized, both to challenge oppressive systems and to affect environmental change one tree at a time at the local level. Her vision of how to make a difference in the lives of rural women and her tenacity to that vision inspires respect if not awe. Her Righteous Commitment to stand up for the environment and rights of people, and her courage to endure personal sacrifice while speaking truth to power, stand as a model for the best of what adult education is about. More importantly, her commitment to African-centered and culturally grounded liberatory environmental adult education places her in a unique position in the field.

Wangari Maathai is a Righteous Leader of liberatory social and environmental change. We as a field have much to learn from understanding the philosophy that informed her actions and the actions of the Green Belt Movement. Certainly the success of the Movement is not hers alone, but built on the hard work, determination, good spirit, and generosity of thousands of men and women. Without people who have supported Maathai and her family, friends, allies, and advocates, she would have been more tired, more alone, and less effective. In the end, however, it is her vision and leadership that generated adult education of a new sort. With that in mind, listen closely to what she has to teach us.
Chapter 1. Introduction to the Research

Introduction

When you look at a tree, do you see timber or something sacred that sustains life? This study is in part about worldview and the role adult education can play in constructing and reconstructing worldview. In particular it offers an approach that recognizes dualities yet informs us how to connect humans, nature, and the divine as part of an “interrelated order of rightness” (Karenga 2006, 7). People who have lived close to the earth for centuries understand this “interrelated order of rightness” because they live those relationships daily. Worldview—one of the most central constructs informing our actions— informs how we see and understand the world, what we value, and what we believe. Worldview encompasses more than what we know. Our worldview is socially constructed, something learned, and evolves out of experience, culture, and history.

This is also a study about liberation and how Wangari Maathai centered African knowledge for the purposes of self-determination and environmental justice. For people who have been colonized, re-centering indigenous knowledge is essential in reclaiming the practices that have protected the environment for centuries. Education that is liberatory must include information about historical events that resulted in lost wisdom, as well as connect people with their ancestral memory (Asante 1997). It must free minds, bodies, and spirits from the chains of racism. In his seminal work, The Mis-education of the Negro, Carter G. Woodson introduces the concept of mis-education, a process by which Africans and members of the African Diaspora were de-centered by Europeans and Euro-Americans:

When you control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his “proper place” and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door.
He will go without being told. If there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary. (2000, xix)

This study presents the Green Belt Movement as a liberatory movement focused on the environment. It is liberatory in that its highest goals include reclaiming African knowledge, values and land management practices, as well as challenging the neocolonial governance that perpetuates exploitation. The Movement addresses decades of mis-education through a variety of grassroots adult education activities.

As adult educators we are called to action, and if our actions are not guided, their impact will be scattered and diffuse. A personal philosophy can provide the framework needed to guide one’s practice. Great leaders are often able to mobilize people around a vision precisely because they can articulate a philosophy that informs the actions they want to take. Hord and Lee describe philosophy:

We turn to Kwame Nkrumah’s notions regarding the vital relationships between philosophy and society. Asserting that “philosophical systems are facts of history . . . [and more than] statements standing in logical relation to one another,” Nkrumah points up the ways in which philosophy, like history, can enrich and illuminate the concrete experiences of human being in their communities. “The evaluation of one’s own social circumstance is . . . as good a starting point of the inquiry into the relations between philosophy and society as any other,” he writes. (1995, 5)

Further, they discuss a tradition of black philosophical thought reflective of and grounded in the African experience. They characterize philosophy within this tradition essentially as an intellectual power of mediation:

It is the philosopher’s role, for example, to mediate the desires and expectations of the individual with the interests of the social collective, interests that the philosopher will be quick to acknowledge are themselves largely responsible for the particular contour of the individual’s desires and expectations. Given the historical facts of European slave-trading, colonialism, and postcolonialism as dominant features of the history of Africa and the African Diaspora, the philosopher’s mediating role takes on a second dimension: not only must the black thinker work out systematically ideals that help shape the individual’s
relation to the life of his or her community, but this thinker must also help mediate the complex relationships between colonizer and colonized, between European cultural demands and the authentic interests of black culture. In short, philosophy is here is called upon to evaluate and counter the dehumanization to which people and ideas of African descent have been subjected through the history of colonialism and of European racism. (1995, 5)

The ancient African philosophical and moral ideal of Maat reflects a worldview grounded in an “interrelated order of rightness,” and values harmony, balance, and reciprocity. While Wangari Maathai is a leader in contemporary times, the belief system upon which her philosophy is drawn aligns with this ancient worldview, suggesting its continued relevance and applicability today. This research illustrates how Wangari Maathai used adult education to both “mediate the complex relationships between colonizer and colonized” and to “counter the dehumanization to which people and ideas of African descent have been subjected through the history of colonialism and of European racism.” Her practice has been effective because she can articulate the philosophy behind her actions.

Lastly, this research calls us to rethink the place of environment in our adult education agenda. For example, how many curricula related to democracy, human rights, social justice, Human Resource Development, or literacy address issues pertaining to environment? This research calls us not only to consider the integration between environment and social issues in our programs, but also to do so in ways that are locally and culturally relevant to the populations they serve.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to introduce Wangari Maathai as a visionary African adult educator to the field of adult education. This historical study examines Maathai’s philosophy and
how it informed adult education within the Green Belt Movement. The study also provides a model of Righteous Leadership for liberatory environmental adult education.

**Statement and Background of the Problem**

The literature in any field serves as a vehicle for sharing the knowledge base within that field. The literature in the field of adult education has usually been culturally exclusive, favoring Eurocentric ideas and constructs (Colin 1994). This has meant that the works of Africentric scholars and scholars who are members of the Africa Diaspora have not been well represented in the literature of the field. This implicitly suggests that no Africentric scholarly works have consequence, and that important intellectual works are not available to adult educators and others who may be interested. Specifically, literature pertaining to Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement is absent, a distinct problem since she is an internationally recognized visionary African leader whose work has adult education at the core.

Sociocultural and intellectual racism has led to gate keeping in the academy, and this has led to the exclusion of scholarly works by Africentric scholars. This has occurred in part because publishing houses and journal review boards have maintained and protected Eurocentric interests and privileges. The result has been control of ideas and access to information which as Akbar suggests, “Whoever controls ideas can actually manipulate the physical resources of the entire world . . . An ‘educated’ person would want to maximize their control of ideas that are to be communicated because they understand that a real measure of human power is the ability to influence ideas” (1998, 39). Certainly colonialism relied heavily on the control of ideas in order to manipulate and control resources. Through this Eurocentric control of ideas, African history, like many other histories, becomes distorted or excluded in the dominant knowledge base. This results in a kind of intellectual and scientific colonialism. According to Nobles, “Scientific
colonialism is a process wherein the political control of knowledge is carried out by a sophisticated process of falsifying the production of information and ideas” (1986, 19). It is precisely this falsification that colonials employed to control not just the material world, but psychological and intellectual control of the mind.

Africentric texts are important because they offer culturally grounded knowledge and histories, as well as counter narratives to dominant texts. The exclusion of Africentric scholarship in the adult education literature suggests there is no African history (Asante 1991). Historical texts document lived experience and become repositories of a knowledge base. According to Colin, “Systematic exclusion of the history and contributions of any groups of persons leads to selfethnic negation” (1998, 13). Colin (1989) also notes that educational systems or programs built upon a partial and ethnocentric knowledge base perpetuate intellectual and cultural racism. “Freirean” and feminist approaches tend to dominate both scholarship and practice in the discussions of development in Africa. While both theoretical perspectives may offer valuable insights, they are not culturally relevant to African-centered adult education practitioners because they reflect non-African meaning schemes and worldviews.

Significance of the Study

This study expands the knowledge base in the field of adult education by adding to our understandings of African and global adult education history. Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her work through the Green Belt Movement to connect environmental justice with social justice. This study will add to the field by introducing an African adult educator whose life and work provide a model of Righteous Leadership for liberatory environmental adult education. Through the Green Belt Movement, Maathai employed adult education as a way to approach community development as a decolonization process. The
Movement also used adult education to foster the revitalization of indigenous culture, selfethnic identity, and women’s empowerment. The centering of African women in the Movement is important because their lived experience situates them in a way to understand interlocking systems of oppression.

The field of adult education should be concerned with the work of Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement because of her profoundly successful approach in linking environmental protection with social, political, and economic issues. Initially she addressed a locally identified problem—firewood shortage—by using adult education to build knowledge and capacity with local women in order to identify the root causes of the conditions they faced. Ultimately her work and the work of the Movement used adult education and a liberatory agenda to address the impacts of colonialism. A primary aim of the agenda was to counteract environmental racism and re-center the African knowledge base that had fostered sustainable land use and healthy living for generations.

It is vital to understand that the political, sociocultural, and economic conditions in Kenya that necessitated the founding objectives of the Green Belt Movement were the result, in part or full, of British colonial rule. The exploitive interests of colonials resulted in environmental degradation, loss of indigenous knowledge, disempowerment of people, and the marginalization of women. While African people reclaiming their lands and culture have made much progress, effects from colonial domination are still in place (Hickling-Hudson 2006). Aid continues to be a venue for imperialistic agendas as former colonial powers have tried to maintain dominance and control through postcolonial development agendas. The agendas conceived by Europeans, Australians, and Americans often perpetuate conditions that existed under colonial rule and benefit Africans only insofar as they do not detract from the interests of
the colonizers (Nyerere 1962; Youngman 2000). Given these modern conditions, the Green Belt Movement agenda is as relevant now as when it began over 30 years ago.

**Africentric Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

Wangari Maathai is internationally recognized as a leading environmentalist, pro-democracy and Pan-African activist, and proponent of women’s rights. The movement she started, the Green Belt Movement, is most widely recognized as an environmental movement, although it is also known as a women’s movement, a peace movement, and a pro-democracy movement. Unlike most environmental and women’s movements discussed in the literature and field of adult education, the Green Belt Movement is guided by an Africentric philosophy and worldview. This philosophy informs the Movement’s adult education activities pertaining to environmental conservation, women’s empowerment, community development, and civic education. This philosophy provides the foundation for the Movement’s primary goal of liberation. The Movement grew out of the lived experiences of African people, in particular Kenyan women who are the key leaders and agents in the Movement.

*Africentrism*

This Africentric historical inquiry is situated within the Africentric Intellectual Paradigm. Africentrism refers to a worldview that places African phenomena, history, culture, and experience at the center of investigation. In this study all constructs, perspectives, and units of analysis are grounded in Africentrism, which Asante defines as “a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values and perspectives predominate” (2003, 2). This paradigm views racism as the primary impact factor. In the context of colonialism, racism is a root cause behind issues including environmental degradation.
Scholarship within the tradition of Africentric inquiry is guided by a set of principles that inform how data is collected and interpreted. Described below, these include the cosmological, epistemological, axiological, and aesthetic issues (Asante 1990). These principles speak to how meaning and knowledge are created within an African-centered worldview. The cosmological issue speaks to the role of culture in forming understandings of a metaphysical nature. Myths, legends, and stories reflect cosmological perspectives and issues. As it relates to inquiry, the cosmological issue is concerned with racial formation, culture, and gender.

The epistemological issue speaks to sources of knowledge and truth, which include language, myth, ancestral memory, dance-music-art, and science (Asante 1990, 75). The axiological issue is concerned with ethics and what is good. Beauty is a concept that is sometimes used to describe what constitutes goodness. Lastly, Welsh-Asante describes the aesthetic issue as being comprised of seven aspects which she calls ‘senses.’ These senses are: (1) polyrhythm, (2) polycentrism, (3) dimensional, (4) repetition, (5) curvilinear, (6) epic memory, (7) holism” (1985).

The terms Africentric and Afrocentric are used by and about scholars committed to the agency and liberation of African peoples. Afrocentricity, a term created and developed by Asante (1990), is used to reflect these commitments. According to Asante, “Afrocentricity is a philosophical perspective associated with the discovery, location and actualizing of African agency within the context of history and culture” (2003, 3). Afrocentricity becomes a way of being in the world and “takes a multi-sensory form once it is a fact in one’s life; it is not linear, cannot be analyzed in a single line, and is inherently circular. To the degree it is like this it is opposed to Eurocentric rationalism and empiricism” (2003, 3). Afrocentricity can be transformative for those embracing it as their worldview:
The practice of Afrocentricity as a transforming agent in which all things that were old become new and a transformation in people’s lives of attitudes, beliefs, values and behavior create, inter alia, a revolutionary perspective on all facts. It becomes everywhere sensed and is everywhere present. A new reality is invoked; a new vision is introduced. (Asante 2003, 3–4)

Scholars in this tradition maintain particular responsibilities to the practice of knowledge construction within the paradigm. In the words of Asante, “The Afrocentrist seeks to uncover and use codes, paradigms, symbols, motifs, myths, and circles of discussions that reinforce the centrality of African ideals and values as a valid frame of reference for acquiring and examining data” (1990, 71). Thus a primary goal of scholarship in this tradition is to create and to restore African-centered knowledge and to add to this knowledge base.

While all Africentric scholars view their work through the lens of Africa and the African experience, some employ additional lenses to understand further the experience of Africans or members of the Diaspora. Womanist scholars are particularly interested in the experience of African women and women of the African Diaspora. This study does not employ a Womanist lens; however, it is useful to briefly discuss its relevance here.

The impacts of environmental degradation in many places around the globe are usually first felt by women, who have continued to hold responsibility for all functions of running a household. In spite of the fact that African women have often borne the brunt of colonial domination, many postcolonial agendas have not centered women’s experience or interests until recently. As such, the Womanist perspective can be used to better understand the decolonization process as it relates specifically to African women. Womanist scholar Vanessa Sheared introduced the concept of polyrhythmic reality to adult education and described the ways in which African women and women of the African Diaspora inhabit multiple locations: “The concept of polyrhythmic reality reflects the belief that individuals do not just have multiple
realities and distinct understandings of them. Instead, individuals experience intersecting realities simultaneously—their realities are polyrhythmic” (Sheared 1994, 28). The concept of polyrhythmic reality is important for understanding the integrated nature of the Green Belt Movement agenda and its commitment to the issues growing out of the lived experience and multiple places African women inhabit.

A Womanist analysis would include a focus on the multiple and intersecting oppressions experienced by African women that were created through colonial domination. In Kenya, gender oppressions occurred through changed gender roles and social structures that were forced on Africans by the British. Changing class and economic conditions and dynamics further oppressed Kenyan women. Colonial domination was rooted in a racist worldview, so that race-related oppressions were central to the lived experience of African women living under colonialism.

Within the context of postcolonial development, many African leaders and change agents use the term *empowerment* to refer to similar aims embodied in the term *liberation* when talking about goals for women and education. Therefore, the terms *empowerment* and *liberation* may be used interchangeably in this study. Manthoto Lephoto offers Stromquist’s definition of empowerment in the context of educating women for empowerment as “a process of changed distribution of power, both in interpersonal relations and in institutions throughout society” (1995, 2). In Lephoto’s words, “empowerment is a four dimensional process, and that to act as equal partners in development, women have to be empowered in these four dimensions: cognitive, psychological, economic and politic” (1995, 5). Maathai recognized the relationships between these dimensions, in part through her own experiences, and thus designed educational programs that addressed all four.
Philosophical Elements

This study focuses on the philosophy of an Africentric adult educator. As such, it is important to note the ways in which her philosophy is informed by or reflects elements in the African philosophical tradition. The following section describes salient concepts employed in the analysis of data. These concepts are quilted together as part of a larger philosophical frame that can be used to view Maathai’s philosophy, and more importantly to consider the application of her philosophy to liberatory activities. This overarching philosophical frame has roots that are very old, yet it contains elements that have maintained relevance through the centuries: “The foundation of all African speculation in religion, art, ethics, moral customs, and aesthetics are derived from systems of knowledge found in ancient Egypt” (Asante 1990, 47).

The ancient African philosophical and moral framework of Maat provides conceptual grounding for understanding and describing Maathai’s philosophy. While she does not speak specifically of Maat, her practice as an activist and educator reflects those ideals inherent in this philosophical and moral framework. Thus Maat provides the historical antecedent to a philosophy born out of Maathai’s lived experience. Maat may not be largely present in the general modern discourse or at all in hers, yet it holds relevance for the practice of Africentric adult education today. Maat is a philosophical orientation that calls for action, as is Maathai’s philosophy. Her commitments to justice, “right relationship” and in particular serudj-ta (further defined in chapter 3), are not just an abstraction but rather lived out in her practice of adult education and her leadership of change. Indeed, all of her commitments as manifested through her activism and leadership reflect a Righteous Commitment (discussed more in chapter 5). These concepts relate to her deep level of commitment to the practice of renewing, repairing,
and restoring the world. What follows is a short history of Maat and description of its relevance to this study.

Kemet, or ancient Egypt, was the source of some of the earliest African civilizations, and its history spanned from 3500 B.C. to the decline of the kingdom between 526 B.C.–50 B.C. Kemet gave rise to many powerful leaders and ideals, including the philosophical framework of Maat. In Kemet, Maat was known as both a principle and a goddess (a symbolic representation of the principle) pertaining to justice, truth, balance, and universal order. Maat was also understood as a conceptual framework, philosophy, and moral ideal. The commitments of the Green Belt Movement, a values-based movement, draw upon the historical antecedents of Maat in the ways that the Movement connects the well being of people to the well being of nature. From a Maatian perspective, the relationship between humans and nature is understood as reciprocal.

Maatian philosophy in action is informed by a commitment to worthiness, which means to be worthy before people and worthy before nature. To be worthy means that one behaves in accordance with her or his highest self. In practice this means that one strives to be honest, fair, kind, and in right relationship with the world. Right relationships are harmonious, just, balanced, truthful, and reciprocal.

In addition to a philosophical and moral ideal, Maat can be understood as deep wisdom (Colin 2007). This wisdom grows out of the experience of becoming a Maatian person. A Maatian person is learning while seeking to live particular moral ideals or commitments. This is a complex venture, for truly knowing these ideals means knowing what they are not. Committing to them, as for any real commitment, often requires sacrifice. Thus, wisdom comes from knowing both what one’s commitments are and are-not, and knowing what one gains as well as
what one gives up. Wangari Maathai is a model of a Maatian person and leader, not simply because she embodies this wisdom but also because she does so in a way that is not dogmatic, ideological or judgmental. She lives Maat while embracing the complexity of human nature and the human experience.

_Salient Concepts_

Agency is an important concept in Africentrism. It reflects one’s ability to act and speak in one’s own name. Within the context of Africentric social change, agency is a process by which people transform and are transformed by their engagement with Africa. Agency as a process and a goal from an Africentric perspective is inherently collective, which means that to stand in one’s full potential means to stand in the full potential of all African peoples.

Adult education in the Green Belt Movement fosters agency as a central aim. It does this by renewing and restoring African knowledge on a wide variety of topics, from natural resource management to nutrition to issues of governance. One of the most significant adult education programs, Civic and Environmental Education, has empowerment as a primary goal. This program pursues this goal by teaching people about and how to identify root causes of daily problems, and how to address them drawing on their own knowledge and experience. The manifestation and growth of agency within the Movement and its members can be seen in acts of solidarity and collective action. These include peaceful protests on behalf of others, shared responsibility for organizing, and most obviously people standing up for their rights and speaking in their own name.

The Nguzo Saba is a set of seven African-centered principles that have held significance for Africans and members of the Diaspora for a long time. These principles of faith, purpose,
unity, creativity, cooperative economics, collective work, and self-determination provide a framework for understanding how the Movement enacts certain values through its activities (Karenga 1977). The Green Belt Movement embodies the Africentric values reflected in the Nguzo Saba through its approach to community development and adult education. For example, at a structural level, the Movement’s organization is rooted in the principle of Kujichagulia, or self-determination. The Movement’s senior, mid-level, and community based leadership is comprised of individuals who are African and are committed to the environmental and social revitalization of Africa. Two additional principles of the Nguzo Saba that inform the Movement are Ujamaa (cooperative economics), and Ujima (collective work and responsibility). These principles are employed in the approach used by women working for the tree planting campaign. These women share financial risk and profit and maintain collective ownership of tree nurseries and related resources. The agenda for the Movement started at the grassroots with the identification of the need for fuel wood as a focus of attention (Maathai 2006).

To a lesser degree, the other four principles of Nia (purpose), Imani (faith), Kuumba (creativity), and Umoja (unity) are also embedded in the actions of the Movement. The Movement has articulated a shared mission, vision, and set of objectives that speak publicly to its commitments. Kuumba is reflected in the spirit of experimentation that is fostered. Umoja is reflected in the solidarity of women’s groups helping each other, and in the solidarity of people protesting together. The Movement has continued to address issues and problems created by colonialism and Euro-American-style imperialism by prioritizing the perceived needs identified by local people. Imani is practiced through prayer at the start of Civic and Environmental Education seminars. These examples represent a few of the ways the principles of the Nguzo Saba are embedded in the Movement.
Liberatory Adult Education from an Africentric perspective involves educational processes that center the lived experience, worldview and histories of African peoples, and is used to free people from the bonds of racism. Julius Nyerere of Tanzania was one of the first postcolonial leaders to articulate a perspective on Liberatory Adult Education. He spoke of his vision for education, and his beliefs related to its purpose publicly and as a part of his policy. For him, education was about human liberation.

The starting point of Nyerere’s general views on education and development is that the purpose of these is human liberation. In a speech to the Dag Hammarskjöld Seminar on Education, Nyerere stressed that the purpose of education is “liberation through the development of Man [sic] as a member of society. The mind as well as the body should be liberated by education, thus making him aware of his potential as a human being, living in harmony with his neighbors and his environment.” (Mulenga 2001, 21)

In this process, African history is reclaimed and re-centered. How we come to know history is rooted in our cultural grounding, our language and meaning constructs. Therefore, approaches to Liberatory Adult Education must be culturally relevant to those whom the programs are intending to serve. Culturally grounded community-based programming is important in making educational experiences accessible and nonexclusive. In the words of Colin,

*Africentric Culturally Grounded Programs* are by their very nature and design community-based and have both local and global implications. These programs provide both formal and informal educational activities that are reflective of the sociocultural realities and lived experiences that are indigenous to African Peoples as a result of the impacts of sociocultural and intellectual racism. The specific programmatic goals reflect African Centered Principles. (1999)

Understanding Africentric culturally grounded programs is important to this study because many of the postcolonial educational and community development efforts in Kenya, such as the Green Belt Movement, addressed the impacts of racism through a process of re-education, following Woodson’s (2000) conceptual understanding of the impacts of mis-education. Re-education in the context of postcolonial liberation is often multifaceted and
includes the intellectual, psychological, and spiritual domains. This re-education must meet people where they are, in the places they inhabit both physically and psychologically. To be effective, the curriculum must include Selfethnic Reflectors (Colin 1989) that provide a means by which Africans and members of the African Diaspora see themselves in what and how they are learning. Selfethnic reflectors are especially significant in the context of liberatory education:

Selfethnic Reflectors is a concept that speaks to the importance of seeing representation of one’s ethnic group. In the context of education it speaks to the importance of “reflectors” that allow African-Americans to see themselves in philosophies, personalities, organizations and program offerings. In a broader context it is of critical importance to the development of selfethnic pride. (Colin 1989, 17)

At a foundational level, Maathai infused the liberatory adult education activities of the Movement with selfethnic reflectors in her valuing of local knowledge, local leadership, African constructs and tools for teaching.

Theory

This study employs Africentric Postcolonial Theory as the primary lens through which to view the history and impact of racialized imperialism. In particular, it speaks to the experiences and perspectives of African and other people who have been de-centered, exploited, and dominated by Europeans and non-Native Americans in pursuit of white supremacy and capitalism. The exploitation of natural resources for commodities to manufacture and sell was central to colonialism in Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas, and many other places around the globe. Within the larger discourse of postcolonialism however, Africentric postcolonial theorists are particularly concerned with understanding the impacts of colonial domination, not just in the context of political economies, but also in terms of racism, social relations, and the destruction of culture. These scholars write about the particular periods of time in history that relate to the
colonization of African peoples. As well, Africentric postcolonial theory can help us further understand the impacts of British colonization in Kenya, not just on people but also the environment. Colonialism in Africa did not just change gender and family relations and the dynamics of economic exchange, but it also resulted in self-ethnic negation (Colin 1988), economic dependency, and—central to this study—environmental degradation.

Africentric postcolonial theory employs an analysis of racialized imperialism in order to set the stage for re-centering institutions such as education, government, healthcare, and social welfare systems in their appropriate cultural center. Some Africentric postcolonial scholars and activists like Maathai recognize the connections between different dimensions of freedom and oppression. Their work addresses the ways in which liberation is contingent on freedom within all realms of experience: the physical, the psychological or spiritual, the social, and the political. In the words of Asante,

Economic freedom must always be connected to political and cultural freedom else freedom does not truly exist . . . In fact, land must never be equated with freedom; freedom is a mental state . . . Furthermore, political power or state power without cultural and economic power is also meaningless for liberation. (2003, 15)

Numerous Africentric postcolonial scholars (Cesaire 1972; Fanon 1967; Nkrumah 1964) address the psychological and spiritual impacts of racism and call for decolonizing the mind as an essential component of a postcolonial agenda. Decolonization, in the words of Nkrumah, is about the “recognition and destruction of imperialistic domination” (1964, 62) on the mind, body, and spirit.

In Africa, a number of post-independence leaders set forward visions for their countries that embodied a liberatory agenda rooted in self-reliance. Many of these postcolonial agendas involved reclamation and re-centering of African ideals, structures, and ways of life. Some of these leaders, such as Nyerere, were absolute in their rejection of things European, while others
such as Kenyatta (first postcolonial leader of Kenya), were inconsistent. It is important to recognize that despite their approaches, these leaders played a critical role in the evolution of their countries at particular points in history. The 1960s were a time of significant liberatory change in both Africa and the United States. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the independence movements in Kenya and other neighboring countries informed each other, and they were influential in Wangari’s thinking and how she eventually approached liberatory adult education.

Among these post-independence leaders, Nyerere publicly articulated a role for education in the liberation of his people.

Nyerere saw education as a means of bringing about human liberation and social equality. For Nyerere, the education of the individual was mainly a means of advancing the collective good of society; adult education should inspire a desire for change and instill an understanding that change is possible. (Mulenga 2001, 17)

Nyerere put forward his vision for Africentric community re-development in “Education for Self-Reliance” (1967), which was a public policy that involved a return to pre-colonial structures and values. This policy embraced and expanded an African socialism, which through its implementation was an act of resistance against Euro-American capitalism.

Nyerere’s work constitutes an oppositional, counter-hegemonic discourse aimed at dismantling what Said referred to as the “science of imperialism.” . . . [H]is “Education for Self-Reliance” (1967) represents a bold and unique effort to humanize education and make it a force for social transformation and for the development of an egalitarian (socialist) society. (Mulenga 2001, 17)

“Education for Self-Reliance” is based on the principle of Ujamaa, or African socialism, and is grounded in the concept of human equality. Nyerere’s Ujamaa reflected a commitment to the collective welfare of society grounded in traditional African values, and he positioned education as a primary vehicle to achieve this. “Education for Self-Reliance” was a liberatory
policy that used education to foster agency in order to prevail against the interests of a dominating group.

In “Education for Self-Reliance,” Nyerere forcefully argued that colonial education was motivated by a desire to inculcate the values of the colonial society; individuals were trained for service in the colonial state. Other postcolonial thinkers make similar observations concerning the eroding influence of colonial education on African identity . . . Africans were mis-educated to think that the only way to human dignity and self-esteem was to exchange their traditional culture for a Western way of life. (Mulenga 2001, 20)

Liberatory education is a transformative process in which Africentric intellectual, historical, and cultural knowledge bases are shared in order to re-center African people and people of the Diaspora.

Many postcolonial agendas in the 1960s and 1970s did not focus explicitly on reversing the degradation that was a result of environmental racism. They did, however, put forward plans for agriculture and natural resource infrastructure that indirectly addressed it. Environmental racism is defined this way:

Racial discrimination in race-based differential enforcement of environmental rules and regulations; the intentional or unintentional targeting of minority communities for the sighting of polluting industries such as toxic waste disposal; and the exclusion of people of color from public and private boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies. (Chavis 1987)

The Environmental Justice Movement attempts to reverse environmental racism. Environmental racism was common within colonialism and took on many forms, from the stealing of fertile lands to the clear-cutting of indigenous forests. The entire capitalist enterprise upon which colonialism was built, and upon which neocolonialism still is, rests on the availability of natural resources at the cheapest costs. Extraction or unsustainable use of these resources results in their demise, and the infrastructure needed to support these activities requires huge environmental and social costs as well. Social inequity is perpetuated through the non-negotiation of who controls
these resources and access to them. In the process of empire building, local people are displaced or forced to work, directly or indirectly, in poor conditions and for low wages.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study were as follows: (1) What is Wangari Maathai’s philosophy and how has it evolved? (2) How has Maathai’s philosophy informed adult education within the Green Belt Movement? And (3) How has Maathai’s philosophy informed her vision and leadership?

Methodology

The methodology employed for this study was an Africentric historical inquiry that focused on the history and philosophy of adult education within the Green Belt Movement. The study is historical in that, “it provides an interpretation of events related to their socio-historical context at points in time” (Merriam and Simpson 2000, 76). Historical texts document lived experience and become repositories of a knowledge base. “Historical inquiry is of greater service to a field when it is used to examine . . . the impact a practice has had on people’s lives” (77). This history informs us about the practice of adult education within an environmental, social, and liberatory movement. As stated by McDowell, “Historians examine the past so that we may have a better understanding of the content of past events and the context in which they took place” (2002, 4). This study examines the context in which a philosophy and adult education practice developed and their application toward environmental and social change. Historical inquiry is important to add to the knowledge base and potentially to inform practice. By understanding our past, we can hope to better understand our future.
Racism has been a significant factor in the erasure and marginalization of African histories within the literature of many fields and within the larger public consciousness. Danai Mupotsa reminds us that history is particularly important for Africans and members of the Africa Diaspora due to these impacts of racism:

The production of knowledge is crucially important to liberatory projects in relation to Africa and its Diaspora, as noted by Anthony Bogues when he states, “For the African human, the exclusion was complete—it was both ontological and epistemic erasure. Both these forms of erasure have profoundly shaped contemporary discussion about thought—the meaning and construction of intellectual traditions. (2006, ii)

History, as a reflection of lived events, must also be situated within the context of place. Place in a broad sense goes beyond location to include time, space, and a particular orientation in the world. In the words of Asante,

Our place is the constantly presenting and re-presenting context, the perspective—that is, history to us. The Afrocentrist sees knowledge of this “place” perspective as a fundamental rule of intellectual inquiry because its content is a self-conscious obliteration of the subject/object duality and the enthronement of an African wholism . . . All knowledge results from an occasion of encounter in place. (1990, 5)

Thus, within an Africentric historical study, the scholar must seek to understand socio-historical factors through encounters in place, be they geographical, temporal, or spatial. When examined together, these factors offer a holistic view of history and expand the knowledge base beyond simply an accounting of events in time.

Data Collection and Analysis

Historical Data Collection

Historical studies often rely heavily on text material and other written or audio forms of documentation because they are examining or describing events in time. These studies may also
employ interview or other oral forms of data collection. All historical research relies on two types of data sources. Primary sources are those where the author was a direct observer or eyewitness of the event, and secondary sources describe observations of those who did not witness the actual event (Merriam and Simpson 2000, 79). In this study, primary and secondary sources were both reviewed; however, mostly primary sources were analyzed and employed.

Role of Primary and Secondary Data Sources

A purpose of this study was to introduce Wangari Maathai to the field of adult education in her own words and on her own terms. As such, this study relied almost exclusively on primary sources, with secondary sources only used to reinforce something presented in a primary source. The primary sources employed in this study included two books written by Wangari Maathai: her memoirs *Unbowed* (2007) and *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (2006), and a documentary film entitled, *Taking Root* (2008), produced by Lisa Merton and Alan Dater of Marlboro Productions, Inc. Transcripts from the filming of the Civic and Environmental Education program were also used as a primary source, although much of this footage was not used in the final version of the film. Permission to use this transcript was secured from the film producers, which was based on permissions they received from participants to share material used in the filming. A copy of their Appearance Release is provided in Appendix C. In addition to these three key sources, various speeches, interviews, articles, an original training manual, and position papers were used. A full listing of these sources is included in the reference list at the end of the document. The primary sources include documents from 1991 to 2007, including several sources from before Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. Data sources were identified through a variety of means, including library and Internet searches, discussion and e-mail with Green Belt Movement staff,
the Green Belt Movement website, and conversations with the producers of the documentary film, *Taking Root*.

**Additional Data Sources**

In addition to primary sources, data from an interview with Dr. Scipio A. J. Colin III was used in the discussion of Righteous Commitment in chapter 5. This interview built on previous work that explored Colin’s concept of Righteous Commitment. The interview used in this study was taped and transcribed. A copy of the transcription was provided to the interviewee for review and returned to the researcher with clarifications. Institutional Review Board protocols were followed throughout. Copies of the Confidentiality Agreement forms are provided in Appendices A and B.

**Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using a layered analysis approach. This process involved the application of concepts and theories to extract meaning from the data. As an Africentric historical study, all concepts and theories employed to extract meaning in this study were grounded in the African worldview. The initial coding of data included a sorting by the following three large categories: salient concepts relative to Africentrism, philosophical frameworks, and theoretical frameworks. The next layer of analysis led to identification of specific units within each of these larger categories. This included the concepts of agency, Selfethnic Reflectors, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, faith, unity and Liberator Adult Education. The philosophical framework employed was the ancient moral and philosophical ideal of Maat, and included concepts such as Righteous
Leadership and Serudj-ta. The primary theoretical frame employed in analysis was Africentric Postcolonial Theory, and included concepts such as environmental racism.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides an overview of the purposes and significance of the study, the research questions, the methodology and relevant conceptual framework, and the data analysis. This Africentric historical inquiry looks at the philosophy of Wangari Maathai and how that philosophy informed her leadership of adult education within the Green Belt Movement. Maat is significant to the work of Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement because the philosophy guiding their work appears to reflect a Maatian perspective. This is evidenced by the adult education activities of the Movement, which are holistic in their orientation and rooted in a deep commitment to justice. These activities help people understand root causes of environmental degradation, civil unrest, and oppression by teaching about relationships, such as those between colonialism, poverty, racism, and capitalism. This philosophy applied to adult education teaches how domination and exploitation of people is connected with domination and exploitation of nature.
Chapter 2. Wangari Maathai and the Birth of the Green Belt Movement

The trees of the field will yield their fruit and the ground will yield its crops; the people will be secure in the land. They will know that I am the LORD, when I break the bars of their yoke and rescue them from the hands of those who enslaved them.

-Ezekiel 34:27 (NIV), used in the introduction to Unbowed

Introduction: Colonial History

Throughout past centuries European people have colonized African people and land through domination, exploitation, and oppression (Cabral 1972). Colonizing involves processes intended to destroy culturally situated knowledge, values, and ways of life (Mulenga 2001) and is rooted in a social construction of race (Hickling-Hudson 2006). The cultural stripping and reprogramming occurred in Africa through various hegemonic systems including education, legal, land tenure, and religion. Christian missionaries, school systems, and colonial governments worked together to dominate and convert Africans to a different way of life, one in which they were not centered and did not maintain power. Colonialism also practiced exploitation of the environment for the development of market economies based on enterprise that was extractive, often nonrenewable, and capitalistic. Africans were not direct beneficiaries of wealth created by these economies.

Prior to the arrival of the colonial settlers and missionaries, the land in Kenya was fertile and sustainably managed:

Before the Europeans arrived, the people of Kenya did not look at trees and see timber, or at elephants and see commercial ivory stock or even at cheetahs and see beautiful skins for sale, but when the country was colonized and we encountered Europeans with all their knowledge, technology, religion and culture, all of it new, we converted our values into a cash economy like theirs. Everything was now perceived as having a monetary value. As we were later to learn, if you could sell it, you can forget about protecting it. (Richards 2007, 1)
Colonial interests in Kenya, as in much of the world, were rooted in the availability of resources for capitalistic enterprise. The missionaries were followed by other settlers who:

- introduced new methods of exploiting our natural resources: logging, clear-cutting native forests, establishing plantations of imported trees, hunting wildlife, and undertaking expansive commercial agriculture. Hallowed landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress. (Maathai 2007b, 6)

In Kenya, Great Britain maintained colonial rule from the late 1800s until the 1960s. At the time the British arrived, over forty ethnic groups in Kenya lived in distinct geographic areas. During this time, the British divided Kenya into regions, known as provinces, which often cut through communities without regard to the indigenous people.

The system of governance that the British introduced during the colonial period is in many ways still used today in various sectors. For instance, the British colonists divided Kenya into regions so as to better control the indigenous people. After independence, the new local government decided to maintain these regions (or administrative units), and it is through these units that the people of Kenya continue to be governed. (Maathai 2006, 3)

To maintain hold on the territories, European governments sent settlers to their colonies. In Kenya, the British government allowed settlers to locate in the fertile highlands that were the homeland of the Kikuyu people. “The settlers received titles deeds to most of the land in areas where they preferred to settle . . . To make way for them, many people were displaced, including a large number who were forcibly relocated to the Rift Valley” (Maathai 2007b, 9). The lands they were relocated to were called “native reserves.”

Missionaries were some of the first settlers:

- Throughout the nineteenth century, European missionaries criss-crossed Africa, clearing the way for Christianity. Almost immediately behind them came numerous explorers, adventurers, fortune seekers, and those in service of the European powers prospecting for riches in Africa (both natural and human) to exploit. (Maathai 2007b, 8)
The missionaries focused on health as a vehicle to do their work converting Africans to Christianity. The approach they used was to treat health problems at health centers they established in local communities. Missionaries used this venue to indoctrinate Kenyans with Christianity and to create relationships based on dependency. Over time as Kenyan adults converted to Christianity, missionaries would teach them how to read using the Bible as their text. The name given to Kikuyus who had converted to Christianity was *athomi*, which meant “people who read”. The British favored the athomi and often appointed them as chiefs or sub chiefs.

In addition, the athomi culture was presented by those who embraced it as progressive, its members moving forward into a modern world while the others were presented as primitive and backward, living in the past. The athomi culture brought with it European ways and led to profound changes in the way Kikuyus dressed and adorned themselves, the kinds of food they ate, the songs they sang, and the dances they performed. Everything that represented the local culture was enthusiastically replaced. (Maathai 2007b, 11)

The missionaries also set up schools, another vehicle to convert Africans to Christianity. Prior to the arrival of missionaries, Kikuyus and other Kenyans had a predominantly oral culture and passed knowledge through the spoken word. In order to promote European norms missionaries devalued these traditional systems of teaching and learning. Over time, the erasure was virtually complete. Everything local or indigenous was replaced: food, crops, clothing, personal adornment, and faith. As Wangari Maathai shares in her memoir, “Pockets of the old way of life persisted . . . [but] a nearly complete transformation of the local culture into one akin to that of Europe had taken place in the generation before I was born” (Maathai 2007, 10–11). Kenyans maintained control of their own knowledge succession, even if it was coded. They walked the line between preserving their culture and colonial assimilation, although in the end they would never be allowed to truly assimilate.
The British also developed a cash economy, initially by an income tax for men that had to be paid with money, not livestock. Since the British were the only ones in Kenya with money, African men were forced indirectly to work for the settlers to pay the taxes. As a result, indigenous Kenyan men went to work on settler farms or in their offices, often leaving behind their families. This shift resulted in changed gender roles as women were left as head of households and “it also introduced negative phenomena such as prostitution, absent fathers, and sexually transmitted infections that were unknown until then and persist as significant challenges in society today” (Maathai 2007b, 14).

In traditional times, both the women and men practiced farming, though they grew different crops . . . As times changed and the social structure of the African communities was interfered with by the colonial system, the women gradually took up the men’s roles because many men began to move to urban areas for formal employment. However, the absence of many men from the farms did not mean that they had given up their roles. (Maathai 2006, 29)

In addition to the cash economy, the British maintained their dominance, through other means of intimidation such as the creation of social hierarchies.

British civil servants, especially provincial administrators, always wore very impressive uniforms, and people in uniform tend to look orderly and disciplined, and to have a mystique about them. Their uniforms were a deliberate means of enforcing respect and fear of authority as a means of making the local people subservient and therefore easier to govern. This fear is entrenched even today. (Maathai 2007b, 34)

Typical of many colonial administrations, the British also used willing Kenyans as conduits between the colonial settlers and the Africans. These Africans in essence became complicit in the oppression of their people because they adopted British values and practices in exchange for status and favors.

Beneath the rank of district officer, which was always held by a white man, there were local people whom the British appointed to positions that were closer to the people. The British authorities found it more convenient and effective to have local administrators acting as the ears and the eyes of the colonial administration.
. . they were thought of as collaborators, whose allegiance was to the British and not their own people. (Maathai 2007b, 34)

These systems of oppression evolved until independence, when many of them took on new form but did not disappear. The British ruled Kenya until 1963 when Kenyans regained independence through an armed liberation struggle known as the Mau Mau Movement.

**Wangari Maathai: Childhood**

Wangari Muta was born in the Kikuyu village of Ihithe in the central highlands of Kenya on April 1, 1940. The eldest girl in a family with six children, she occupied a special place in the family. In her own words Maathai talks about being “born at a time when an old world was passing away” (Richards 2007). She describes her growing up years as being surrounded by “bush and trees, beautiful clean rivers and millet, sorghum, arrowroot and bananas and many of the traditional crops you don’t see much of anymore” (Richards 2007, 1). “At the time of my birth, the land around Ihithe was still lush, green, and fertile . . . the soil was rich, dark red-brown and moist” (Maathai 2007b, 3–4).

Ihithe was one of a cluster of villages of about three hundred households, roughly nine miles from Nyeri town. Nearly everyone, men and women, were farmers, growing food for their families. There were not settler farms nearby, so everyone lived and worked in one place. It rained frequently, but the rivers were always clear and clean because the land and the riverbanks were covered by vegetation (Maathai 2007B, 33).

Her parents were both farmers in the highlands around Mount Kenya, considered a sacred place to the Kikuyus and central in their lives. Maathai grew up understanding the significance of Mount Kenya both environmentally and socially. Beliefs about the sacred role of the mountain were handed down through generations, but eventually were interfered with by the British.
Everything good came from it: abundant rains, rivers, streams, clean drinking water . . . [but] hallowed landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the local people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress. (Maathai 2007b, 5)

The shift away from local respect for the mountain resulted in changed behaviors toward it and the ecosystems it supported. In turn, these changed behaviors resulted in changed environmental conditions.

Sadly, these beliefs and traditions have now virtually died away. They were dying even as I was born. When European missionaries came to the central highlands at the end of the nineteenth century, they taught the local people that God did not dwell on Mount Kenya, but rather in heaven, a place above the clouds. The proper place to worship him was in church on Sundays, a concept that was unknown to Kikuyus. Nevertheless, many people accepted the missionaries’ worldview, and within two generations they lost respect for their own beliefs and traditions. (Maathai 2007b, 5–6)

In her early years, Maathai spent a lot of time with her mother learning about planting seeds, farming, and nature. When she was very young, her father went to work on a settler’s farm and so the family was separated. This was not uncommon, and through this plantation system men from different tribes came to live together for the first time. “On Mr. Neylan’s farm, people from many communities worked, including Luos, Kipsigis, and Kikuyus, who without the economic and labor system the British instituted would not have lived in proximity to each other” (Maathai 2007B, 22). This movement and parceling of people laid the foundation for a variety of conflicts to come, many of which centered on who had access to land and natural resources.

In 1943, Maathai and her mother left Ihithe to work on the farm where her father and two older brothers were. The farm was in the Rift Valley and needed manual labor. The settlers tended to control the markets for agricultural products, so her father did not yield much personal income. Much of her early life was spent with women and girls working in
the fields. It was here she learned about planting and germinating seeds, indigenous food
crops, and the racism embedded in the economics of agriculture.

In addition to food crops like peas, beans, arrowroots, millet and maize, my
mother continued to grow pyrethrum, as she had in Nakuru. At the time, it was the
only cash crop black farmers were allowed to grow. Tea and coffee cultivation
was restricted to the white settlers. My mother gave me my own small garden of
about fifteen square feet in the middle of her farm and provided me with
instructions on how to plant and care for crops . . . Because my plot was so small
and I planted so early in the growing cycle, I spent a lot of time literally watching
the seeds germinate. (Maathai 2007b, 37–38)

Through much of her childhood Maathai was immersed in a traditional Kikuyu life that
included traditional roles and activities for females, such as agriculture, securing water and
wood, tending home and children. Much of this she learned from her mother, who was the
person most central in her life as a child.

I was her eldest daughter, and that naturally made us very close, because almost as
soon as I could walk she would ask me to help her. When you are the first girl in a
Kikuyu family, you become almost like the second woman of the house. You do
what your mother does and you are always with her. The two of you become almost
like one. As far back as I can remember my mother and I were always together and
always talking. She was my anchor in life. (Maathai 2007b, 13)

Two younger sisters were born on the farm, and as they grew older Maathai spent her days
with them picking the crops that were low to the ground and collecting firewood. Not only
did she learn technical indigenous knowledge about agriculture as a child, she learned about
the connection between nature and the divine. The fig tree in particular was sacred to the
Kikuyus, and the children learned from their mother about the importance of respecting this
manifestation of the divine in nature.

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 migumo, or
wild fig trees. 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.” (Maathai 2007b, 44–45)

50
The embedded respect Kikuyus and other Africans had for nature shaped how they interacted with it, and “in such ways, without conscious or deliberate effort, these cultural and spiritual practices contributed to the conservation of biodiversity” (46). The social environment in which she was raised also reflected respect, a sense of security, and a deep feeling of being at peace.

What I know now is that my parents raised me in an environment that did not give reasons for fear or uncertainty. Instead, there were many reasons to dream, to be creative, and to use my imagination. As I grew older, I learned that we can convince ourselves and our children, and if we are leaders we can convince our citizens that we are in danger, either from what people might do to us or what we might do to ourselves. (20)

In 1947 Maathai was sent to Nyeri to help take care of her younger sister. At the time, her two older brothers were already there attending school. The Mau Mau resistance movement had begun, and due to the violence no other children in the family were being sent to school. Also around this time, the colonial government had begun to establish commercial plantations of non-native trees in the pristine Aberdare forest nearby. She remembers seeing huge bonfires as the natural forests went up in smoke in order to clear the land for plantations. The non-native (exotic) trees that the British introduced to Kenya grew fast and were used to support the budding timber and building industry. In order to promote the planting of these exotic varieties, foresters gave seedlings to farmers free of charge. But there was another cost.

However, these trees did damage, too. They eliminated local plants and animals, destroying the natural ecosystem that helped gather and retain rainwater . . . Over the subsequent decades, underground water levels decreased markedly and, eventually, rivers and streams either dried up or were greatly reduced. (Maathai 2007b, 39)

Thus, plantation agriculture and cash economies combined with Christian mission work resulted in a slow shift away from traditional African ways of life toward one in which
the colonizers interests were centered. This degradation on all levels laid the foundation for
the context in which the Green Belt Movement would emerge.

Education, America, and the Civil Rights Movement

Typically during this time boys were sent to school, not girls. Maathai had a brother,
Nderitu, who strongly encouraged her parents to send her to school instead of him. They agreed,
and she was sent to attend Ihithe Primary School, established by Presbyterians. This was a bold
and unusual action for her family to take, but they saw her potential. At Ihithe Primary she
excelled as a student and was fond of her teachers. School provided a place for her to learn about
nature, which she loved and was curious about. Following Ihithe Primary, she attended St.
Cecilia’s Intermediate Primary School and Catholic mission boarding school for four years. It
was here that she was introduced to Catholicism. She recalls how she enjoyed the learning,
sports, and the nuns who were “nurturing, encouraging, and compassionate” (Maathai 2007b,
58).

Speaking English was required at school since it was the official language of
communication and instruction in colonial Kenya. If caught speaking in their native language,
the girls were made to wear a button that read “I am stupid; I was caught speaking in my mother
tongue” (Maathai 2007b, 59–60). In retrospect, Maathai reflects on how profoundly this added to
the trivialization of anything African for children of that generation, and laid the foundation for
a deeper sense of self-doubt and an inferiority complex. The reality is that mother
tongues are extremely important as vehicles of communication and carriers of
culture, knowledge, wisdom and history. When they are maligned, and educated
people are encouraged to look own on them, people are robbed of a vital part of
their heritage. (60)

Kikuyus, like many other ethnic groups, lost their language through this kind of cultural
domination.
During her time at St. Cecilia, Maathai and her friends became involved in a Christian society known as The Legion of Mary. This organization had a strong commitment to service and volunteerism for the common good, and they engaged in various service projects (Maathai 2007b, 60). It was also during this time that she decided to become a Catholic. This was perhaps one of her first major independent decisions, one she did not discuss with her family. Coinciding with this conversion, she changed her name from Wangari to Mary Josephine, Mary Jo for short.

The Mau Mau rebellion, also known as the Land Freedom Army, was underway during many of these years while she was at school, and in many ways she was protected from the violence that ensued. Resistance to colonial rule was not new when it arose in the 1950s; however, there had been a period of non-activity for quite some time leading up to Mau Mau. “In the early decades of the twentieth century, all the peoples of Kenya resisted colonization, and many were killed in the process. Eventually, they were all defeated, suppressed, and largely silenced” (Maathai 2007b, 62). The catalyst for the launch of the Mau Mau struggle grew out of the dissent of Kenyan soldiers who returned from World War II (after fighting for the British) and received no recognition or compensation for their service. The Mau Mau resistance movement was a liberation movement, and their primary platform called for independence from British colonial rule.

While there are many theories about the origin of the term “Mau Mau” the one I find most interesting is this: In Kikuyu, when beginning a list, you say “maundu ni mau—the main issues are…” and then hold up three fingers to introduce them. For the Mau Mau, the three issues were land, freedom, and self-governance. (63)

While Maathai was at school, the colonial government employed various propaganda campaigns to turn Africans against their own people. The brainwashing that occurred in her school led her to be scared because she did not know the Mau Mau were the freedom fighters. Forests were burned as the British tried to control the liberation armies that were hiding there.
Later on I understood why it was necessary for the British to create a system that is oppressive, in order to be able to utilize the resources in this country the way those in power want to utilize the resources. Forests were burned by the British because the freedom fighters were hiding there. Over 100,000 Africans were killed . . . fewer than 100 British were killed. (Merton and Dater 2008)

The propaganda divided people and created strife for families who had divided allegiances. In spite of this conflict, many Kenyans looked toward independence and what that might mean for the reclamation and rebuilding of their country.

A newly independent Kenya would need educated men and women ready to fill key positions in the government and society once the British administrators departed. To that end, in the late 1950s the Kenyan politicians of the day, led by Tom Mboya, Gikonyo Kiano, and others initiated and encouraged contacts with political and cultural figures in the United States, led by then-senator John F. Kennedy, Andrew Young, and others. The aim was to provide scholarships for promising students from emerging African states to receive higher education in the United States. (Maathai 2007b, 73)

The Kennedy Airlift provided bright, young African students an opportunity to pursue higher education in the United States (Richards 2007). Maathai rose to the top of her class, and through a scholarship made available through the Catholic Bishop of Nyeri in 1960, she was chosen to be part of the Kennedy Airlift in September. John F. Kennedy funded this initiative through his personal foundation, but he also pushed the State Department to expand scholarships for African students. This program eventually saw nearly 600 Kenyans brought to study in different colleges and universities throughout the United States (Maathai 2007b, 74). Maathai attended Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas, from 1960 to 1964; she pursued a liberal arts education with a major in biological sciences.

During her tenure at Mount St. Scholastica, Kenya won independence from the British in 1963. Jomo Kenyatta, of the Kenya African National Union party (KANU), was elected the first Prime Minister. In 1964 the Republic of Kenya was formed and he became president.
Unfortunately, however, the decision was made to continue the colonial practice of exploiting the forests and not recovering forested lands (Merton and Dater 2008).

Following Maathai’s undergraduate study, she attended the University of Pittsburgh on a scholarship and earned her Master of Science degree in biological sciences in 1966. While in Pittsburgh she completed a paper on helping women in rural areas work together to promote development efforts. This assignment provided a conceptual foundation that later informed her work with rural women to initiate the Green Belt Movement. Her first experience with environmental restoration also occurred while she was in Pittsburgh. Like other manufacturing towns in the United States in the 1960s, Pittsburgh was coming to terms with the legacy of pollution after one hundred years of the industrial revolution, and was making an effort to clean its air (Maathai 2007b, 93).

While she was finishing her master’s degree she was approached about returning to Kenya to serve in the newly independent country as a research assistant at the University of Nairobi. Before returning, she decided to pursue a doctoral degree, which she began in Germany. She credits this time in Germany as significant in her development as an educator.

In America as well as in Germany professors were very engaged with their students, as was Professor Hofmann, under whom I learned how to teach . . . I also learned to distinguish when students were listening and understanding and when they were lost . . . Ironically, this approach and method of communication was useful on the political campaign trail because I could engage the public and discuss with them rather than preach to them. (Maathai 2007b, 113–114)

Overall her experiences with formal education, both as a teacher and a learner, significantly shaped her understandings of human behavior and democratic practice in the context of learning.
Early Activism and Independent Kenya

In 1966 Maathai returned home hopeful, optimistic, and ready to assist in the newly independent Kenya. In the spirit of reclaiming her African identity, she changed her name back from Mary Josephine to Wangari Muta and prepared to embark on reclaiming her country. When she arrived at the new job she had been offered as a research assistant, she learned the position had been given to someone else prior to her arrival. This upset her, as did the fact the employer did not seem to have any qualms about it. She recalls that the experience provided insight on how both gender and ethnicity would become a barrier for her professionally.

That same year, in 1966, she met Mwangi Mathai, who was a businessman and to whom she’d eventually marry. By 1967 they were engaged and she returned to Germany shortly thereafter to continue her doctoral research. Mwangi and Wangari were married in 1969, and she became Wangari Muta Mathai (later, in 1979 when they divorced she added an additional “a” to her last name in order to differentiate it).

Around this time, Mwangi decided to run for Parliament and Wangari agreed to assist him. Her brother-in-law secured a job for her in the Department of Veterinary Anatomy at the University of Nairobi. While working there she completed her doctorate, ran Mwangi’s campaign, and was pregnant with their first child. (She eventually had three children, Waweru, Wanjira, and Muta.) Also in 1971, she became the first woman in East and Central Africa to receive a Ph.D. At the age of 38 she held the first female professorship at the University of Nairobi. She became chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and then an associate professor in 1976 and 1977 respectively, and was the first woman in the region to attain those positions. She was hardly recognized for these major accomplishments at the time, but now talks about the significance they held for her personally (Maathai 2006).
In the years following independence, Nairobi was safe, green, clean, and small. Mwangi won the election, but the role of politician’s wife held implications for Wangari that she had not anticipated.

I was very conscious of the fact that a highly educated woman like me ran the risk of making her husband lose votes and support if I was accused of not being enough of an African woman, of being “a white woman in black skin.” This attitude of many of our people was curious given that Kenyan politicians were part of the elite. Like Mwangi, many had been educated abroad, spoke English at home and in their workplaces, wore European-style clothes, and lived in European-style houses. But they wanted to project their “Africanness” through their wives, both at home and in society. Women are commonly described as carriers and promoters of culture. (Maathai 2007b, 100–111)

Mwangi had promised jobs to his constituency in Lang’ata during the campaign, and to help him fulfill that promise, Wangari decided to start a small business enterprise called Envirocare Ltd. Envirocare addressed both unemployment and environmental problems by hiring women to plant trees and work in the gardens of wealthy people. Envirocare struggled financially and eventually did not succeed.

By 1976 Wangari had joined the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), and it was through the Council she was able to again plant trees with women’s groups to help the environment. Originally called the Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization, the NCWK was emerging at that time as a leading advocacy organization for Kenyan women. It had begun as an organization by and for British colonial women, but it was turned it over to Kenyan women in 1963 and became a forum for them to discuss their future in postcolonial Kenya.

The Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organization was itself established, packaged and managed by wives of British administrators during the Mau Mau struggle. The main reason for its establishment was to preoccupy and control Kikuyu women in Central province so as to deny them time for other issues, such as paying the Mau Mau freedom fighters secret visits to provide them with food and information on what the colonial government was planning. MYWO also “rehabilitated” women who converted from the Mau Mau struggle to become British government collaborators. (Maathai 2007b, 31)
In the 1970s the United Nations decided to hold its first International Summit on Women in Mexico. In Kenya, as in other places, women began to organize by exploring key issues related to the summit’s theme of energy (Maathai 2007b, 59). In preparation Maathai engaged in dialogue with rural women about their needs. Even as a highly educated woman she was able to connect with these women and their issues because she had grown up in the countryside.

Education, of course creates many opportunities. In Kenya, for most people of my generation and after, a high school education or a college degree is a guaranteed ticket out of the perceived drudgery of subsistence farming or the cultivation of cash crops for little return. I, too, got this ticket out, but I never severed my connection to the soil. (71)

The issue women were talking about was fuel wood and how they had to walk further and further due to the deforestation. They also were talking about other problems caused by deforestation such as malnutrition and lack of clean water.

While working as a lecturer at the university and doing field work, Maathai too had begun to notice deforestation, which was due to population growth and the conversion of land to cash crops like tea and coffee. These cash crops, like most mass-produced, single-crop agricultural systems, exploited the soil and reduced biodiversity. When visiting villages, she noticed that there was not enough fuel wood to cook traditional foods, which used more energy to prepare, so women were purchasing refined foods. These refined foods did not have much nutritional value, so malnutrition was becoming a problem.

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. These “cash crops” were occupying land previously used to produce food for people to eat.

Consequently, women were feeding their families processed foods like white bread, maize flower, 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

58
attractive and practical, because available firewood for cooking was limited due to deforestation in the region. (Maathai 2007b, 123)

The environmental degradation was becoming obvious. For generations before the British arrived, local people had understood the relationships between trees and water, and trees and soil.

When I went home to visit my family in Nyeri, I had another indication of the changes under way around us. I saw rivers silted with topsoil, much of which was coming from the forest where plantations of 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. (121)

Maathai did not attend the UN International Summit on Women in 1976, but her involvement in preparation for the event gave birth to the idea of focusing on reforestation and on fuel wood as an agenda for women in Kenya. She liked the idea of tree planting for its ease and symbolism, as well as its practicality.

I said to the women let’s plant trees, and they said, “yea, but we don’t know how.” Initially we tried to give them seeds but then decided against it because we did not want the women to become dependent. So we had the women collect seeds and try to propagate those seeds from the areas where they were. We said, if you plant a tree and the tree survives, we will compensate you. (Merton and Dater 2008)

As part of the effort, she arranged a way for women to be paid a small sum of 4 cents (U.S. dollars) for each seedling that survived. This small sum motivated the women who needed wood and had little income. The women liked the idea and began to learn how to plant and grow trees. As they learned what to do, they began to show each other, and the learning expanded from one woman to another, from one women’s group to another.

Under Maathai’s leadership the women started local tree nurseries by collecting seeds from indigenous trees that were found in forests and fields. These native seeds were not only free, but would help restore the biodiversity she was trying to recreate. As the community-based
tree nursery effort became more structured and formalized, Maathai wanted an identity for the program. She sought to embed its identity within the spirit of the new Kenya.

A name was needed for this new venture. I wanted to place tree planting within the spirit of Jomo Kenyatta’s idea of community mobilization, which he popularized in the national slogan Harambee! (Kiswahili for “Let us all pull together”). I suggested to the NCWK that we call our project Save the Land Harambee. My vision was that, instead of fund-raising for this initiative, the Harambee spirit would inspire Kenyans, both wealthy and poor, to plant trees to protect our country from desertification. (Maathai 2007b, 130)

Maathai talked to the head at Karura Forest about establishing a tree nursery there. At the time, Save the Land Harambee was organizing seminars to teach basic tree nursery management to rural women. Initially they requested the assistance of professional foresters to teach the women how to plant trees. But the professional foresters sent by the forestry division used technical language and communicated in way that was not accessible to the women. It did not take long for Maathai to realize that she was working with intelligent and competent women who, as farmers, already knew about planting and monitoring crops. So rather than dealing with the professional foresters, she and the women chose a more common sense approach: “You gather seeds, let them dry, and put them in the ground. If they’re good, they’ll germinate, if they are not good, they will not germinate. And so, we started teaching ourselves” (McNeil 2007, 1).

The women decided to do away with the professional approach to forestry and instead use their common sense! After all, they had for a long time successfully cultivated various crops on their farms. What was so difficult about applying this knowledge to tree planting? The campaign encouraged them to use their traditional skills, wisdom and plain common—and perhaps women—sense. (Maathai 2006, 27–28)

In addition to traditional planting methods, the women employed experimental and innovative techniques. Maathai developed a ten-step process for starting a tree nursery that could be replicated in different communities. The initiative was known for a short while as Save the Land Harambee. On June 5, 1977, World Environment Day, seven trees were planted at
Kamukunji, each honoring a leader from one of seven major ethnic groups. This ceremony was considered the official launch of the Green Belt Movement. The name came from a campaign to plant seedlings in groups of 1,000 or more in order to form a belt of vegetation. By the end of 1977, communities were taking ownership of the effort, and “before we knew it we had thousands of people doing the same thing; It was now communities empowering each other to plant trees for their own needs” (Merton and Dater 2008). In order to sustain the effort, which was growing rapidly, Maathai pursued various grants. She asked the Chief of Forestry to help support a goal of planting fifteen million trees by providing trees to people. The motto for this campaign was “one person, one tree”. The goal was achieved only months later.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Movement, which was housed under the National Council of Women of Kenya, became known overseas and began to get press attention. President Daniel Arap Moi was now in office and was trying to reduce power of Kikuyus. When Maathai decided to run for chairperson of the Council, the Moi administration tried to thwart it, based partly on her Kikuyu heritage and also because she was an educated woman: “Another factor against me becoming the NCWK chairman in the government’s eyes was my education. At this time in Kenya, the number of highly educated women was still tiny and we were viewed with suspicion by many people in authority” (Maathai 2007b, 157).

For much of the 1980s, the NCWK and Green Belt Movement struggled to survive. The Movement had evolved from tree planting to organizing women to fight deforestation and to stand up for their rights. The women had become involved in protesting corrupt logging practices and illegal development schemes as well as organizing for democracy against a dictatorship. This posed a direct threat to the Moi administration. During this time, “the regime labeled me
‘disobedient,’ and sought to curtail my activities and my voice” (Maathai 2007b, 159). In spite of this Maathai was elected chair of the NCWK, a position she held from 1981 to 1987.

On a more personal level, the election had brought to the national arena the issue of power and gender. Soon after I became chairman, some of my friends and supporters came to me to say that my election was causing them trouble with their husbands, many of whom were influential in government. They asked me to step down and allow someone else to lead the NCWK. This saddened me, but I was not wholly surprised. “Some of you have supported me for a long time and I won’t ever forget that,” I told them. “But I can never withdraw from the chair after women have given me their support and their confidence. I must stay.” (159)

She tried to return to the university, but was denied a job because those in power perceived her as a liability. Her early experiences fighting gender discrimination (described more in chapter 5) laid a foundation for her marginalization within the academy. These were difficult times: she was without a job, her home had been seized, and she had become politicized.

The replies (to job applications) I received were not promising . . . It dawned on me that no one would employ me because they saw me as an enemy of the political system. I had been in a direct confrontation with the government. (166)

In spite of awards and speaking engagements, Maathai was still under attack at home. She was receiving death threats because she had organized several protests and demonstrations against corrupt governance practices, human rights violations, and illegal logging activities. She had engaged the international community by informing allies and strategically using the media to expose the Moi administration. As an extension of shunning her, the government also shunned the Green Belt Movement (GBM). But GBM was growing in visibility and support inside and outside Kenya, resulting in funds and media attention. Eventually the risk she posed to those around her became so great that in the interest of both groups, she decided the Green Belt Movement should separate from the NCWK.

In addition to the NCWK, Maathai was involved in other civic organizations such as, The Red Cross and the Kenya Association of University Women. Following independence, Kenyan
women began to fill positions in these organizations formerly held by British colonial women. She joined the Environmental Liaison Center, an organization working on environmental issues in coordination with the United Nations. Although headquartered in Nairobi, the organization was comprised mostly of international members. She became the board chair and worked with the organization until it officially became the United Nations Environment Programme (www.greenbeltmovement.org).

Growth of the Green Belt Movement

A great river always begins somewhere. Often it starts as a tiny spring bubbling up from a crack in the soil, just like the little stream on my family’s land in Ihithe, which starts were the roots of the fig tree broke through the rocks beneath the ground. But for the stream to grow into a river, it must meet other tributaries and join them as it heads for a lake or the sea. So, when people learn about my life and the work of the Green Belt Movement and ask me “Why trees?” the truth of the matter is that the question has many answers. The essential one was that I reacted to a set of problems by focusing on what could be done. As it turned out, the idea that sprang from my roots merged with other sources of knowledge and action to form a confluence that grew bigger than I would have ever imagined. (Maathai 2007b, 119)

The Green Belt Movement began as a local tree-planting campaign, evolved into a grassroots organization with a focus on environmental conservation and helping communities improve their quality of life, and eventually grew into a multifaceted international movement.

I founded the Green Belt Movement 30 years ago to respond to environmental challenges, which I observed both during my childhood and while working at the University of Nairobi and the National Council of Women of Kenya. These challenges included loss of indigenous forests and local biodiversity, soil erosion, lack of clean drinking water, malnutrition and lack of firewood. I realized that to live in a clean and healthy environment ought to be a human right. (Maathai 2007a)

Through the years it has maintained its commitment to grassroots action, and to this day Maathai describes the Green Belt Movement as an “indigenous initiative”: 

63
It is wholly managed by Kenyans and deliberately prefers to rely on local capacity, knowledge, wisdom and expertise where appropriate. Although it has members in both urban and rural areas, most members are in the rural areas, and a very large majority of them are women. (Maathai 2006, 6)

The early success of GBM stemmed from the way Maathai engaged local people in identifying and addressing their own problems. The approach she used was not simply to teach women how to plant and manage trees, but to shift how women thought about and understood the circumstances of their lives.

Therefore, the overall goal of GBM in Phase I was to raise the consciousness of community members to a level that would drive them to do what was right for the environment because their hearts had been touched and their minds convinced—popular opinion not withstanding. (Maathai 2006, 33)

Maathai recognized that sustained action required a commitment to environmental conservation that went beyond people seeing conservation as a choice. She understood that an environmental ethic needed to be created that included values. Therefore the Green Belt Movement articulated specific values and encouraged its members to embrace them: (1) love for environmental conservation; (2) self and community empowerment; (3) volunteerism; (4) strong sense of belonging to a community of Greens; and (5) accountability, transparency, and honesty.

What enabled this kind of growth was the way GBM maintained its commitment to the human aspect of their work. From the beginning, Maathai was side by side in the dirt with the women she was leading. She placed value on each individual, and in each place she engaged the women in communities. This approach fostered a certain solidarity and commitment to a larger vision. And the solidarity built momentum that resulted in hugely increased capacity within communities. This capacity led to tangible environmental outcomes such as planting more than 30 million trees on farms, at schools, on church compounds, and in other locations. The Green
Belt Movement eventually became known internationally as a leading environmental movement to address degradation through grassroots education.

In addition to education related to deforestation, GBM developed a variety of adult education programs to address democracy, human rights, and other issues related to environmental protection and conservation. These programs, described in chapter 4, resulted in tangible economic and sociopolitical outcomes such as increased revenue for women and the overthrow of the Moi regime through multiparty elections. The Green Belt Movement empowers communities worldwide to pursue the interconnected goals of protecting the environment and promoting good governance and cultures of peace.

The success of the Movement in Kenya led to the creation a second arm, Green Belt Movement International. GBM International is a nonprofit umbrella organization for GBM Kenya and has four goals: to strengthen and expand the Movement in Kenya, to share its programs with other countries, to empower Africans (especially women and girls and nurture their leadership and entrepreneurial skills), and to advocate internationally for the environment, democracy, and peace. In 1986, under the auspices of GBM International, the Movement established a Pan African Green Belt Network. The purpose of this network was to teach people from African countries the Green Belt Movement’s approach to environmental conservation and community building. Over forty people were trained initially, with some who went on to establish similar tree-planting initiatives in their own countries. Several other African countries also initiated tree-planting campaigns, including Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Lesotho, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe.
Wangari Maathai: Political Involvement

From the mid-1960s until 1992, all members of Parliament had to belong to the one political party, the Kenya African National Union. In late 1991, however, the call for multiple parties reached its climax with a constitutional change that reintroduced a multiparty political system. From it, two major political factions emerged: the ruling party (KANU) and all the other new political parties that formed the Opposition. This lasted until the end of 2002.

In 1992 Kenya held its first multiparty elections since 1966. Unfortunately the pro-democracy groups that had formed in response to KANU had splintered, and the election was neither free nor fair. A high number of women ran for Parliament and the Opposition was represented in these races. Sadly however, power-hungry politicians used ethnicity and tribal clashes as a strategy to divide Kenyans, thus fracturing the vote. This tactic was built on social divisions created by the colonial government in its approach to land re-distribution and access. In response to actions of the government that fostered this kind of violence, the Green Belt Movement began organizing in areas of tribal violence to get people to understand that the government incited it. Wangari Maathai traveled incognito around the country and took many precautions due to the violence and death threats against her. Eventually she went into hiding, first issuing a statement to friends around the world requesting their governments stop aid unless tribal clashes end.

In 1997 Maathai was encouraged to run for the presidency and for Parliament, which she decided to do. However, at the end of the campaign the race was sabotaged by a message someone sent out indicating she had dropped out of both races. Moi was re-elected. Maathai and her supporters founded the Mazingira Green Party and joined the other Green Parties worldwide to work on issues of environmental and social justice. In 1998, Maathai joined the campaign of
the Jubilee 2000 Coalition. As co-chair of the Jubilee 2000 Africa Campaign, she played a leading role in seeking the cancellation of the overwhelming and un-payable debts of poor countries in Africa.

By 2000, I had been working to address the consequences of poverty in Kenya through a holistic approach to development for twenty-five years. Poverty was not only the result of bad governance and environmental mismanagement, but also an outcome of the global economic system, one of the key realities of which, for poor countries, was crippling debts . . . To me, the campaign’s greatest opportunity lay in educating ordinary Africans about how the debts were incurred and what their relationship was to good or bad governance. (Maathai 2007b, 277–278)

She also campaigned tirelessly against land grabbing and the theft of public forests, often being imprisoned, beaten, or threatened in other ways. As a result of GBM efforts, public pressure increased for Moi to step down in the 2002 elections, especially after his land grab of 170,000 acres of virgin forest. The related protest Maathai staged resulted in her going to jail; however, international pressure about the illegal arrest resulted in her release without charge. As her close friend Vertistine Mbaya reflects on that protest, “It got her into trouble, not just because she was protesting but because she was demonstrating the power of a civil society” (Merton and Dater 2008). Shortly following her release she was invited to become a visiting fellow at Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, where she taught on sustainable development. On her return to Kenya she ran for Parliament as a candidate of the National Rainbow Coalition, the party under which Opposition groups had come together. She employed their populist message:

> What I wanted the voters to understand was that I could not give them alms or even miracles, but together we could lift ourselves up and address the conditions of our poverty and disempowerment and regain our sense of self-respect. Together, we could establish governance that was responsible and accountable to the people. (Maathai 2007b, 287)

Her campaign slogan was “Rise up and Walk” and she won.
Current Roles and Work

Wangari Maathai is internationally recognized for her persistent struggle for democracy, human rights, and environmental conservation. She has addressed the United Nations on several occasions, and she spoke on behalf of women at special sessions of the General Assembly for the five-year review of the 1992 Earth Summit. She has served on the U.N. Commission for Global Governance and the Commission on the Future. In December 2002, she was elected to Kenya’s Parliament and was subsequently appointed by Kenya’s president as Assistant Minister for the Environment. She and the Green Belt Movement have received numerous awards, most notably the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize.

On October 8, 2004 Maathai received a call from Oslo informing her she was to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In celebration she stopped at a hotel on her way to Tetu, and planted a Nandi flame tree facing Mount Kenya. She could not think of a better way to celebrate, since trees had held so much significance in her life.

Trees have been an essential part of my life and have provided me with many lessons. Trees are living symbols of peace and hope. A tree has roots in the soil yet reaches to the sky. It tells us that in order to aspire we need to be grounded, and that no matter how high we go it is from our roots that we draw sustenance. It is a reminder to all of us who have had success that we cannot forget where we came from. It signifies that no matter how powerful we become in government or how many awards we receive, our power and strength and our ability to reach our goals depend on the people, those whose work remains unseen, who are the soil out of which we grow, the shoulders on which we stand. (Maathai 2007b, 293)

She understood the significance of the Nobel Committee’s historic decision: “In one stroke they created an opportunity for a huge constituency of environmental, peace, democracy, human rights, and women’s rights activists to come together” (Maathai 2007b, 300). By recognizing the links between peace, sustainable management of resources, and good governance through education and action, the Nobel Committee was sending a message to the world.
In 2005 Wangari Maathai was elected Presiding Officer of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC) of the African Union, based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The Council’s charge was to advise the African Union on issues related to African civil society. Eleven African heads of state whose countries are on the Congo Basin also appointed her a Goodwill Ambassador for the Congo Basin Forest Ecosystem, an advocacy role for the conservation and protection of this vital ecosystem. That same year she was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world and by *Forbes* magazine as one of the 100 most powerful women in the world.

Wangari Maathai has been recognized around the world for her work and has a long list of accomplishments. She was listed 6th in the Environment Agency (UK) peer review of the world’s Top 100 Eco-Heroes. She is also listed in the United Nations Environment Programme’s Global 500 Hall of Fame and was named one of the 100 Heroines of the World. In June 1997, Maathai was elected by *Earth Times* as one of 100 people in the world who have made a difference in the environmental arena. She has received honorary doctoral degrees from several institutions around the world, among them Williams College in Massachusetts (1990), Hobart and William Smith Colleges (1994), the University of Norway (1997), and Yale University (2004). She serves on the boards of several organizations, including the UN Secretary General’s Advisory Board on Disarmament, the Women’s Environment and Development Organization, World Learning, Green Cross International, Environment Liaison Centre International, the WorldWIDE Network of Women in Environmental Work, and the National Council of Women of Kenya.
Current Focus of Green Belt Movement

The Green Belt Movement is now understood as both a movement, in the traditional sense, but also an organization that formed around the original activities of GBM. It is only in the past few years that the Green Belt Movement began venturing into income-generating activities as a way of strengthening the sustainability of the organization. For most of its existence, it had depended on funding from various donors for all its operations. While very grateful to donors, it is now seeking to foster self-sustainability (Maathai 2006, 59). Since its inception, the Green Belt Movement has championed the cause of environmental protection. Its vision has been to create a society of principled, grassroots people who work consciously for the continued improvement of their livelihoods. The mission of GBM Kenya continues to be to mobilize communities for self-determination, justice, equity, poverty reduction, and environmental conservation, using trees as the entry point.

GBM Kenya has been committed to and has achieved success in the following areas: community mobilization and reforestation, individual and community empowerment, increased environmental awareness and action, and sharing lessons and approaches internationally.

Community Mobilization and Reforestation

Reforestation has been a primary focus of community mobilization efforts within the Movement. The Movement has worked with community groups as well as individuals to achieve its goals. Today, over 600 community networks across Kenya care for 6,000 tree nurseries. Over the years these networks, along with individuals, have participated in planting more than 30 million trees on private and public land in Kenya alone. These several hundred thousand women and many men have also protected natural reserves and sites with cultural significance, as well as trees in urban areas. This has resulted in the transformation of many landscapes, the protection
and restoration of habitats for local biodiversity, and the contribution toward clean water and healthy soil. Kenyans’ attitudes toward the environment have also been transformed: awareness of the impact of ecological decline has increased along with public interest in defending the environment, including forests and public parks and open space. Tree planting and other reforestation efforts provide an entry point for GBM Kenya’s other educational initiatives, including Civic and Environmental Education, capacity building, and advocacy.

**Individual and Community Empowerment**

The Civic and Environmental Education program grew out of Maathai’s work with women planting trees. She recognized that in order to create lasting change, the women needed to be able to identify and to address the root causes of their problems (including poor use and management of their environment and poor governance at local and national levels). The Civic and Environmental Education program was created to empower people through citizen education training, discussions, and experiential learning. The program addressed topics such as governance, advocacy, environmental conservation, and responsible citizenship. Through these seminars, participants enhanced their knowledge, gained confidence, and developed new skills for addressing both the symptoms and the causes of environmental degradation. These outcomes directly contributed to a high level of action on issues pertaining governance and environment.

For example, during the review process for Kenya’s new constitution, GBM Kenya held civic and environmental education seminars for the public, with former participants teaching new ones. In this way they expanded their network and built capacity within the Movement. As well, they conducted tree-planting activities to support the process and encourage a peaceful transition. Over 250,000 peace trees were planted just during the time the constitution was being developed.

**Increased Environmental Awareness and Action**
Throughout Kenya, water scarcity is a problem. In addition to its work with reforestation, the Movement works with communities on water harvesting and conservation, as well as protection of water quality. A related program within GBM Kenya improves food security—the capacity for families to feed themselves—by promoting the planting of fruit trees and indigenous foods including yams, cassava, and arrowroot. At the household level, hunger has been reduced and nutrition improved, especially where cash crops (coffee, tea, flowers) consume most of farmers’ lands.

**Sharing Lessons and Approaches Internationally**

The Movement has always embedded the value of sharing knowledge in its practice. In the tree-planting programs, capacity was built so that women and communities could teach each other. The Pan African Network and Green Belt Movement International were created to share the knowledge and practice of the Movement with other countries. The Pan African Network alone has trained people in over fifteen African countries. The Lang’ata Learning Centre in Nairobi offers environmental education through exchange programs that expose participating groups to community biodiversity issues through discussions with local leaders and excursions to selected areas around the country. A relatively new program, Green Belt Safaris, uses eco-tourism to share its experiences with groups from outside Africa. This program includes cross-cultural exchange, field-based activities, and seminars.

**Inspiring the General Public**

The way in which the Green Belt Movement has been able to affect such significant environmental change is through the engagement of ordinary people. While the positions it has taken on human rights, democratic governance and just management of natural resources are relevant to people, it has inspired civic engagement through its message, its accessibility, its
grounding in Africentrism, and most importantly its leadership. The Movement’s campaigns to raise awareness about illegal land grabbing and destruction of environment resulted in success because its leaders spoke truth to power. Because of GBM Kenya’s work, the public now understands that the environment is the base upon which all other development rests. This knowledge is empowering, and brings the environment closer to the people. Kenyans continue to request GBM Kenya’s support, including legal advice, to secure public green spaces and other environmental rights.

Building Capacity—Health and Income Generation

One of the initial objectives of the tree planting campaign was to generate income and employment for rural women. The women were paid a small sum for each tree that survived, and in the process learned the economic dimensions of operating a nursery. Another desired outcome of the tree-planting program was to increase women’s access to fuel wood so they could grow and prepare the indigenous food crops that were more nutritious than processed foods. The Movement maintains its commitment to capacity building for women, both in terms of income and health. As a part of its capacity building program, the Movement provides reproductive health information and has introduced the use of drama to disseminate information on HIV/AIDS. Community members explore their knowledge and attitudes about HIV/AIDS through drama, followed by “question and answer” sessions to address myths and misconceptions. GBM Kenya is committed to assisting young women and girls to face the challenges of growing up, including making complex decisions about their sexual and reproductive health and protecting themselves from HIV/AIDS. In the future, GBM Kenya aims to expand this initiative by seeking funds to expand school-based outreach and empowerment seminars on HIV/AIDS.
Another aspect of GBM Kenya’s capacity building program focuses on supporting income-generating activities, primarily for women, but also for men. GBM workshops build skills in areas like food security, food processing and marketing, bee keeping and tree planting. Women’s groups have also produced hundreds of thousands of seedlings, for which they are paid, that are being planted in Kenyan forests where forest cover has declined. The Aberdare Forest in central Kenya was the first program site. Local GBM groups are working in partnership with government authorities, in many cases for the first time ever, to grow and plant indigenous trees. Through school-based seminars, GBM works to train youth in income generation, job skills, and entrepreneurship.

Promoting Sustainable Development

The concept of development for many years was defined by international aid agencies, based upon the interests of economically rich countries. Therefore many of the development schemes presented to most countries in Africa exacerbated environmental exploitation and discrepancies between those with wealth and power and those without. Poverty is a multidimensional problem, manifested in the lack of access to resources, information, opportunities, power, and mobility. It is integrally related to economic, social, political, and environmental realities. GBM Kenya’s activities invest in Kenya’s future by enabling communities to understand the essential links between their basic needs and a healthy environment and to then support equitable and sustainable development. An underlying value and principle of education for sustainable development is self-determination. The Green Belt Movement addresses self-determination in a variety of ways, including working at the grassroots, creating employment within the Movement, reclaiming indigenous knowledge about
management of natural resources and nutrition, increasing the number of agricultural tools in rural communities and documenting and disseminating its knowledge.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provides an overview of Wangari Maathai’s life story, with a particular focus on how her biography contributes to her formation as a liberatory adult educator. The history of colonialism in Kenya is significant in understanding the conditions that led to the need to create the Green Belt Movement. The dramatic environmental and social changes that occurred during Maathai’s childhood and young adulthood called for post-independence leadership to reclaim what was lost. In particular, colonialism had resulted in a degraded environment due to plantation agriculture and development of the built environment, changed social relations, changed land tenure, the creation of a market economy and capitalistic enterprise, corrupt governance and cronyism, and institutionalized racism.

A number of experiences as well as important contexts in Maathai’s early years laid a foundation for the philosophy that informed her practice and leadership. In particular, her family and community grounding in a Kikuyu and African-centered worldview, one that valued holism and the collective good, is apparent in how she approached education. Her love of science and her commitment to nature grew out of her childhood years, living as she says “as a child of the soil.” The nuns who were her teachers in primary and secondary school as well as college provided models of commitment to ethical action. Her opportunities for formal education instilled a love of teaching and learning. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the independence movements in Africa introduced her to liberation movements, and her early experiences of gender discrimination sensitized her to institutionalized oppressions.
In early adulthood she first manifested her commitment to work on behalf of a newly independent Kenya and rural women (a marginalized population) by teaching women to plant trees. This simple idea came to her as she listened to them discuss the problems they were facing in their communities. These problems included lack of fuel wood, lack of clean water, lack of employment or income generating activity, and malnutrition. Fairly quickly she realized that the symptoms of deforestation had much deeper causes and that unless those were addressed, the problems would continue. She began to organize and teach people about the root causes of the environmental degradation, and how it was connected to issues of governance and human rights. These activities, which included adult education programs and civic action, formed a multifaceted agenda for social and environmental change that became known as the Green Belt Movement. The success of the Movement within Kenya led to its growth internationally, and to the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai in 2004.
Chapter 3. Maathai’s Philosophy: Renewing, Repairing and Restoring the World

Maat

All great leaders are guided by a personal philosophy, whether or not that philosophy is articulated in a formal way. Philosophies are not static, but evolve over time. Yet through their evolution they maintain specific core commitments that provide a guidance system for action based on deeply held beliefs and values. Hord and Lee (1995) assert the existence of a Black philosophical tradition. This assertion, although debated on the grounds that the Black experience is too diverse, is relevant for considering shared historical antecedents of various Black philosophies. They suggest three generative themes that inform all Black philosophies. The first is that “the identity of the individual is never separable from the sociocultural
environment” (7). The second relates to the “relational conception of reality,” or put another
way, relates to the interconnectedness of reality: “The traditional African view of the universe is
as a spiritual whole in which all beings are organically interrelated and interdependent” (8).
Lastly, a recurring generative theme in the tradition of Black philosophy is the “central
importance of religion and religion-based ethics as dominant forms for the fundamentally social
expression of core philosophical ideas” (7–8).

These three generative themes, especially the first two, can be observed in the philosophy
that guides Wangari Maathai’s practice as a liberatory adult educator. Her philosophy reflects a
particular call to justice and healing that is grounded in the historical African philosophical
tradition of Maat. Maathai’s philosophy, while born of her own experience, draws on this
tradition and reflects these themes. Although Maat can be sourced to ancient Africa in the area
originally known as Kemet, now Egypt, it is a relevant lens for viewing modern practice. It is
especially relevant as a lens for viewing Maathai’s philosophy, which focuses on relations
between people and nature.

Through the centuries Maat has held relevance in multiple domains, such as philosophy,
governance, a way of life, and an ethical orientation. Maat is rooted in holism rather than duality,
and thus speaks to the interconnectedness of nature, humans, and the divine. As Verharen notes,
a key principle of Maat is an understanding of spirit-matter unity.

This holism is simply a commitment to join together what has been split apart. In
their infancy, humans have radically separated whole categories of beings from
one another: heavens from the earth, humans from animals, men from women,
Africans from non-Africans, and spirit from matter. (2006, 960)

This sort of unity necessitates right relations that are harmonious, non-exploitive, and non-
dominating. Within the Maatian worldview, justice is also understood from a holistic
perspective, providing a more expansive view than a simple legal definition of what is right.
This idea of Ma’at is the idea of justice not merely in legal terms but in terms of
the proper relationship between a human person and the universe, between the
person and nature, between the person and another person. (Asante 1990, 90)

Dr. Maulana Karenga, leading Maatian scholar and Africentric leader, describes a Maatian
person as someone who is in right relationship with all aspects of his or her world.

In addition to Maat as an epistemological (or philosophical) ideal, a moral ideal
and a metaphysical ideal, it is, in a real sense, also an ecological ideal, in as much
as the ideal of Maat opposes all enterprises which tend to destroy the cosmic
order, nature and thereby commits itself to the future or destiny of
humanity…Thus, in spite of the various interpretations of Maat, Maat’s meaning
as an interrelated order of rightness, including the divine, natural and social, is
repeatedly affirmed. (Karenga 2006, 7)

Maat is not just an abstract or esoteric ideal; it is a philosophy that calls for action. One cannot
know Maat, in the deep sense of knowing, without doing Maat. As a moral ideal, Maat compels a
moral stance. The Maatian texts, Declarations of Innocence and Declarations of Virtue, provide
specific guidelines for living and action.

Maat is an interrelated order of rightness, which requires and is the result of right
relations with and right behavior towards the Divine, nature and other humans. As
moral thought and practice, Maat is a way of rightness defined especially by the
practice of the Seven Cardinal Virtues of truth, justice, propriety (righteousness),
harmony, balance, reciprocity and order. (Karenga 2006, 10)

In that Maat calls for living of a moral ideal, it speaks to a model of leadership that has
strong ethical foundations called Righteous Leadership. According to Karenga, “The concept and
practice of righteous leadership is central to Maatian ethics . . . [which] places an ethical
obligation on king, the civil service and community to do Maat, to uphold it and live it” (1989,
375–377). The five criteria for a just leader as outlined in the Story of the Eloquent Peasant by
protagonist Khun-Anup include being without greed, baseness, or a destroyer of falsehood; being
a creator of righteousness, and “one who comes at the voice of the caller” (Karenga 1989, 381).
(This notion of Righteous Leadership as embodied by Maathai will be further examined in chapter 5.)

Karenga identifies an ethic called “worthiness” from Maat. This ethic has two components, worthy before people and worthy before nature.

Worthiness Before People

The Declarations of Innocence, a primary Maatian text, provides both ethical and spiritual guidance on how to be worthy before others. A Maatian moral life is lived out in relationship, and it is the quality of those relationships upon which that life is judged. To be in relationship means that one holds responsibility toward both the other and one’s self. These relationships of mutuality are reflected in the virtue of reciprocity. For example, when a member of the Green Belt Movement earns money, she shares some of it with others.

Acting for one another in mutually beneficial ways . . . clearly applies to both relations between humans and the Divine and between humans and humans . . . and of necessity applies also to relations between humans and nature. (Karenga 2006, 264)

Moral activity is thus defined in terms of self-understanding and the ability and will to respond to others. The model locates responsibility for action directly in the agent in an interactive process. (362)

This obligation to “stand worthy before people” reflects the highest Maatian value and view of what it means to be human. There is a call to do no harm, as well as to practice right relationship.

In fact, the first concern listed in the Declarations of Innocence is that one does no wrong to people. This reflects the Maatian assumption that in the final analysis, although God is the author of Maat, it is in human relations and actions that Maat is most definitively expressed. (311)

The foundation of this sort of action, to stand worthy before others, is a belief in human dignity and a commitment to honor and respect the dignity of others.

Maatian ethics begin and develop in a concern for the quality of human relations and the respect for the human personality and community this requires . . . It is a fundamental African ethical principle that the human being realizes him or herself
only in moral relations with others. The basis of fundamental concern, then, is never the isolated individual but the related person, the person-in-community (325)

Maatian texts discuss social justice and concern for the vulnerable as a key piece of the moral imperative. The spirit of this imperative, to pursue justice on behalf of all people in a community, is rooted in understanding that a community is only as well as its least-well member. In the words of Nobel Peace Prize recipient, Archbishop Desmond Tutu:

In Africa when you ask someone “How are you?” the reply you get is in the plural even when you are speaking to one person. A man would say, “We are well” or “We are not well.” He himself may be quite well, but his grandmother is not well and so he is not well either . . . The solitary, isolated human being is really a contradiction in terms. (Kornfield 2008, 25)

Pursuit of social justice is grounded in a commitment to social justice for all. Maatian texts provide concrete guidelines for daily living as well as character qualities that one should aspire to. Generosity is considered a character quality central to the practice of social justice, both in material terms and in terms of spirit.

Seeing clearly, then, and hearing in the sense of listening to and responding to the demands of justice are at the heart of Maatian moral practice. And this is made even more urgent in relationship to the most vulnerable among us. (Karenga 2006, 333)

Social justice, then, stands at the heart of what it means to follow Maat and create a Maatian moral community. And social justice begins with respecting the human person, and sharing social wealth with neighbors and especially with the most vulnerable. (337)

As described in Maatian texts, character is built by practicing the seven cardinal virtues of truth, justice, propriety, harmony, balance, reciprocity, and order. From a Maatian perspective, it is one’s character that makes her noble; it is one’s righteousness that creates his power (Karenga 2006).

Worthiness Before Nature
Within Maatian ethics, worthiness before nature is equally important as worthiness before humans. This is because the state of nature and the state of humans are interconnected. The person who feels about a tree the way he would feel about a great-uncle will have a much more difficult time cutting the tree down. Likewise, the person who actually does not distinguish between the tree and the great-uncle will have an even harder time. This frame of reference is not uncommon for many African people and members of the African Diaspora because “in Kemetic thought, as well as other African thought, a clear line of demarcation between the spiritual and the physical is not drawn” (Morenz 1984, 6ff in Karenga 383). The term Karenga uses for nature is wnnt or wennet, “which translates as all things in time and space, in a word, the entire physical universe. In its inclusiveness it reaffirms human embeddedness in nature as opposed to being separate from it, which a more narrow definition would suggest” (Karenga 2006, 385).

This understanding of nature as the entire physical universe provides the foundation for the environmental ethics that emerge out of Maat. The framework for this environmental ethic is rooted in certain beliefs and commitments:

1. Unity of Being forms the first ground for Maatian environmental ethics. The natural ethical concerns of Maatian ethics flow first from the concept of a holistic universe, an inclusive order founded on and sustained by Maat (Karenga 2006, 385).

2. Filial Guardianship is based first on humans’ shared interests with other beings of creation growing out of a web of interconnections and mutual effect rooted in their membership in the biotic and larger natural community (391).

3. Shared Heritage defines the world as a divine gift given to all humans for shared and equal benefit, and the world is a divine gift for which we share filial responsibility in its protection and preservation (395).

4. Restoration (serudj-ta) is not simply a physical act of repairing buildings and other ruined things, but is also in its fullest meaning a spiritual and moral act of healing and repairing the world (397).
5. Obligation to the Future includes a rightful and respectful concern for both future generations and the world they will enter (402).

These principles inform Maathai’s approach to adult education for social and environmental change. In particular, the concept and practice of serudj-ta—renewing, repairing and restoring the world—underlie all activities of the Movement and ground her philosophy in a commitment to the future. As noted by Karenga, modern Maatian thought and action are grounded in serudj-ta as a means of fostering right relationship.

Maathai’s leadership and adult education activities in the Green Belt Movement reflect serudj-ta in the focus on environmental conservation, participatory democracy, selfethnic liberation, peace, and human rights.

**Beliefs and Values**

*Worldview is Socially Constructed*

Throughout her written and spoken works, Maathai reflects on how people learn and make meaning. As a lover of learning herself and someone who has thought about learning, she recognizes the many and varied ways that knowledge and worldview are constructed and reconstructed. In her memoir *Unbowed* and in the film *Taking Root*, Maathai discusses the
teaching she received as a child through story. As an African person, the spoken word, and specifically story, was a primary vehicle for transmitting knowledge: “Because Kikuyu culture was oral, refined methods had been developed of passing knowledge to, and shaping the values of, future generations through, among other activities, stories” (Maathai 2007b, 50).

Maathai had an aunt named Nyakweya who was known as an exceptional storyteller. Her aunt’s stories always ended positively, and they used nature, especially animals, to teach moral lessons such as “don’t be greedy” and “look out for tricksters.”

When I went to school I was exposed to books, all of which told different stories from the ones I had heard around the fire. I read Cinderella, Little Red Riding Hood, Sleeping Beauty—stories that Westerners told their children for their moral development but which did not mean as much to me as the stories I was told around the fire. The Kikuyu stories reflected my environment and the values of my people; they were preparing me for a life in my community. (50)

The worldview reflected and taught through Kikuyu stories portrayed relationships between humans and nature as reciprocal. Like most Kikuyu children Maathai grew up believing in reciprocity between humans and nature. This message of harmonious relationships between humans and nature was reinforced through the actions of adults in her community and an ethic of not using more than was needed. This ethic is represented in the practices of the Green Belt Movement, such as the protocol to plant two trees for every tree harvested.

As an adult educator and environmental activist Maathai helps people to understand how a belief that relationships between humans and nature are not reciprocal will lead to the destruction of both. Her approach as an Africentric educator is to bring people back to their indigenous knowledge base, which had provided for sustainable management of the environment for centuries. This knowledge base was rooted in the principles of holism, reciprocity, and balance. In speaking to global audiences today, she regularly calls for a shift in our thinking “so that humanity stops threatening its life support system” (Merton and Dater 2008). This shift in
our thinking, she believes, should reflect an understanding of the interconnectedness between humans and nature.

Maathai’s understanding of the ways in which knowledge is constructed informed the approaches she used to educate people. In all of the programs created and implemented by the Green Belt Movement, dialogue, story, and song were used as culturally grounded vehicles for education. The Civic and Environmental Education seminars emerged out of a need for local people to understand and to act in relation to forces influencing their lives. In the seminars, participants discussed and analyzed their own experiences and perceptions and explored ways to create positive change.

People are Good

Two of the most significant forces shaping Maathai’s beliefs during her formative years were her family and the nuns she had as teachers. Many of the messages she received from both her family and these nuns related to the goodness of human nature. Both were collective in their orientation, valuing the interests of the community, and working on behalf of the common good.

After my education by the nuns, I emerged as a person who believed that society is inherently good and that people generally act for the best. To me, a general orientation toward trusting people and a positive attitude toward life and fellow human beings is healthy—not only for one’s peace of mind but also to bring about change. This belief came from a combination of my education and my Kikuyu heritage, which taught me a deep sense of justice. (Maathai 2007b, 70)

In the film Taking Root, Maathai talks about “her nuns” who modeled a deep orientation toward justice and serudj-ta. They taught through their actions to be in service of others, modeled their commitment to truth, and expressed a positive outlook on the world.

My life has been greatly influenced by the formal education I received during the early part of my life both at home, in Kenya, and abroad . . . Throughout this period, my teachers—who were mostly foreign missionaries—influenced me...
greatly, especially because they were positive, self-giving, and value-driven. (Maathai 2006, 89)

The mentoring she received provided a strong foundation as she began to emerge as a leader. Her belief in the goodness of people brought out the best in others. Even while face-to-face with adversaries, she would try to connect with their desire to be good. For example, once during an attack on her house by police sent from the Moi government, she tried talking compassionately to the armed young men surrounding her house. She told them that they were being used by the government against their own people, and appealed to their sense of identity. Another time, she approached the military leaders who had been an instrument of the government and appealed to them to plant trees around their barracks, which they did. Her effect on them was so strong that these military men now share a message publicly about the role they feel they share with trees: protection. In many instances throughout her life, this openhearted belief in the goodness of people created the room for those who had been oppressive to choose another way. Much of her personal power has come from her ability to inspire people to their highest selves.

Ujima: Collective Work and Responsibility

A practical application of Maathai’s belief in the goodness of people has been her commitment to ensure that all people are cared for and their interests honored, especially those at the margins. The African principles of Ujima (collective work and responsibility) and Umoja (unity) were embedded in the approaches employed by the Green Belt Movement because they reflect commitments to this value. This is particularly evident in the way that the GBM encouraged collaborative learning. For example, a woman’s group that had established a nursery would be called upon to assist a new community group as they began. Like many of Maathai’s beliefs and values, the origins of this belief were rooted in her childhood.
Like most Kikuyu children of the time, Maathai grew up in a polygamous household in which the presence of many adults ensured that all children were cared for. The notion that children belonged to those that birthed them did not exist, but rather all children belonged to all adults.

In a polygamous homestead we learned to live with our half siblings as part of a small community. I felt like everyone in the homestead was a member of the family. I could go to any of the other houses and be welcomed and feel at home, as could any other member of the family in my mother’s house... In many ways, the polygamous system worked well for children. Even though my mother went to work each day in the fields, my brother and sisters and I never felt we were alone. If we were at home, would be taken care of by whichever adult was also home. (Maathai 2007b, 18–19)

In addition to the context of her home environment, the messages she received from the nuns at school reinforced the belief that people are responsible for each other in community. The universality of this message during her childhood became so integrated into her life and worldview that it is not surprising that it formed the foundation of the philosophy that guides her actions. In particular she has focused her efforts to assist those in the margins, recognizing that a community or society is strongest when all its members are strong. It was around the time she joined the National Council of Women of Kenya that she began to publicly work on behalf of those in the margins. NCWK served as a platform for this kind of advocacy for many years.

Although the leadership of the NCWK was generally elite and urban, we were concerned with the social and economic status of the majority of our members, who were poor, rural women. We worried about their access to clean water and firewood, how they would feed their children, pay their school fees, and afford clothing, and we wondered what we could do to ease their burdens. We had a choice: We could either sit in an ivory tower wondering how so many people could be so poor and not working to change their situation, or we could try to help them escape the vicious cycle they found themselves in. (Maathai 2007b, 124)

Today she maintains this sense of responsibility to those in the margins and considers them primary players in liberatory social change.
I feel it is very important to visit communities that advocate ideas I believe in, and that may not have money or power . . . Grassroots activists were instrumental in making our efforts successful and advocating for me when I got into trouble. I want to support them and encourage their work. (302)

This commitment has taken many forms throughout her life, yet she has been especially outspoken on behalf of women, the poor, and those whose human rights are violated by corrupt governance. Activism early in her career to fight gender discrimination at the university provided key lessons on strategy and risk-taking. While these experiences came at a personal cost in terms of her reputation and well being, it also set a new standard and created more favorable conditions for the women who would follow.

Another key act of resistance and civil disobedience on behalf of those in the margins was a hunger strike she organized with mothers of illegally imprisoned sons for their involvement in pro-democracy activity (this event is discussed in chapter 5). This too set the stage for future human rights activity.

*Local, Indigenous and Gendered Knowledge*

When Maathai talks or writes about her life, she often begins with a story about a fig tree in the village where she grew up. Her mother said this fig tree was sacred; it was a tree of God. Everyone in the community considered this tree sacred. Near the tree there was a stream, with clear, clean water that ran abundantly. As a child she would play in the water, looking at frog eggs and tadpoles. She did not know at the time of the intimate biophysical relationship between fig trees and water—their roots draw water up to the surface. She only knew that the two existed together and that the tree was sacred. Following her years at college in the United States,
Wangari returned to the site of this tree and stream, only to find it replaced by a church. The tree had been cut down and the stream had dried up.

She tells this story to illustrate the power of culturally grounded knowledge, and in particular, the significance of a traditional African worldview. This worldview is one in which there is a connection between nature, humans, and the divine. In talking about the destruction of the sacred fig tree she makes the link between the worldview one holds and the way a person is in relationship with her world. She suggests her traditional African (Kikuyu) worldview respects the three-way relationship between nature, humans, and the divine and that this worldview is what had protected the environment for so many centuries. With the adoption of European values, the fig tree she said, “no longer called for the respect, inspired awe, it was no longer protected.” (Merton and Dater 2008) Conversely, the worldview of the Europeans (British) did not value reciprocity between humans and nature, which in turn led to exploitation and destruction of the environment.

This story of the fig tree represents the value Maathai places on culture, not just in abstract terms, but also in how it can be directly linked to survival. Postcolonial and Africentric scholars have written about the impacts of racism on the mind, body, and spirit. In this way they have suggested the link between de-centering people and how that loss can contribute to killing a part of them. Maathai takes this further by suggesting that the de-centering of African people from their worldview that is harmonious, non-exploitive, and reciprocal can literally kill them as the natural resources needed to sustain life (such as water), go away.

Culture is coded wisdom, wisdom that has been accumulated over thousands of years and generations. Coded in our songs, dances, and values . . . there was something in our people that helped them preserve those forests. They were not looking at trees and seeing timber . . . All people have their own culture. And when you take that culture from them you kill them in a way. (Merton and Dater 2008)
In many countries in the years immediately following independence it was not uncommon for young African adults who studied abroad to return to their countries with Eurocentric notions of what constituted legitimate knowledge. Their indoctrination into the elite and powerful systems of imperialism meant that the African intellectual paradigm was under siege. Like most systems of power, many of the post-independence social systems were both Eurocentric and patriarchal. A few leaders, such as Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, put forward African-centered policies and visions.

Although she had been educated in America, Maathai recognized early in her adult life the value of local, indigenous, and women’s knowledge, and maintained a commitment to center those in her work. Not only did she center them, she actively educated others about the way they had been de-valued during the colonial era. In her work with women she would ask them if they knew what self-knowledge was. From its inception the Green Belt Movement was deliberate in its commitment to local capacity and knowledge and to women’s knowledge, and claimed those as key sources of authority. Indeed, when she began her work with rural women she modeled the principle of Kujichagulia (self-determination) by encouraging the women to rely on what they already knew.

Like them, I too had seen and planted seeds ever since I was a child. So I advised the women to look at the seedlings in a different way. “I don’t think you need a diploma to plant a tree,” I told them. Use your woman sense, (Maathai 2007b, 136).

I worked with women because it is them who fetch firewood, look for water, food and feed the family. A degraded environment is more visible to the women than men who can escape into urban areas in search of jobs and opportunities. Sometimes the men get lost in the urban jungle but the women continue to take care of their families the best way they know how. It is the women who are left behind to deal with an environment no longer able to sustain livelihoods. (Maathai 2007a)
Participatory Democracy

Many post-independence leaders in Africa, like in many other colonized places, adopted the colonial interests and ways of ruling that their people had overthrown. This resulted in a variety of constraints to the practice of democracy in Kenya. One dimension of this was the failure of the ruling administrations, first Kenyatta and then Moi, to implement policies that served the people. Infrastructure such as roads and sanitation was not tended to, which over time began to hinder a wide range of development initiatives, from health to education to commerce. This, along with failed and corrupt economic policies, resulted in a growing divide in wealth. The result in Kenya was a large segment of the population living in abject poverty and a small, elite segment in government and business living in extreme wealth (Maathai 2006). Both of these populations contributed to the degradation of the environment. The poor exacerbated degradation because they relied on environmental resources to meet basic daily needs and were unable to grapple with the long-term impacts. The wealth of the rich, on the other had, was dependent on the exploitation of the environment.

These conditions became a starting point for people participating in Green Belt Movement seminars and educational activities. The curriculum included naming those conditions people were observing, followed by an exploration of potential root causes.

Gradually, the Green Belt Movement grew from a tree-planting program into one that planted ideas as well. We held seminars with the communities in which Green Belt worked, in which I encouraged women and men to identify their problems . . . Almost to a person they put all the blame on the government . . . It was partly true: The government was selling off public lands to its cronies and allowing tree farms for the timber industry to be established in national forests, and so destroying watersheds and biodiversity. In many ways the government continued the policies of the colonial era, but made sure the benefits went only to the small elite it favored. In turn, of course, this elite strongly supported the government and helped it stay in power. (Maathai 2007b, 173)
In these programs they would teach about basic democratic principles and about people’s responsibility to speak up for their rights.

This emphasis, rooted in Kujichagulia (self determination), challenged the common perspective many people had that the government was solely to blame.

In this way, communities where the Green Belt Movement worked began to develop personal responsibility for improving their quality of life, rather than waiting for the government, which wasn’t very interested in the welfare of either Kenya’s people or its environment, to do it. This personal responsibility became collective as communities managed their environments better. (Maathai 2007, 174)

Through oral approaches, such as call and response, Maathai and the staff helped people see their own role in maintaining the current conditions, and encouraged people to take responsibility for the outcomes they desired.

However, I felt strongly that people needed to understand that the government was not the only culprit. Citizens, too, played a part in the problems the communities identified. One way was by not standing up for what they strongly believed in and demanding that the government provide it. (173)

In describing how people came to the beliefs that she was working to shift, she says: “Such misunderstandings come about because the majority of the people are poorly educated and therefore do not easily make the connection between their daily problems and the environmental degradation that is the root cause of some of their problems” (Maathai 2006, 78).

Purposes and Goals of Adult Education

*Understanding Root Causes*

In order to fully understand the significance of Maathai’s philosophy and the adult education activities of the Green Belt Movement, it is important to have an understanding of the socio-historical events significant in their formation. Maathai recognized early on that she would
need to address root causes and power structures if she wanted to be successful (Pal 2005), and perhaps because of her own positive experiences with education, she saw teaching and learning as central to the project.

As a young person Maathai loved learning, excelled in school, and quickly secured a place at the top of her high school class. Her teachers, mostly European missionaries, aroused in her a love of science. This lifelong passion for science was rooted in her childhood love of nature and her sense of wonder about the natural world. She credits the way she thinks about and values understanding root causes as something she learned from science. From her view, learning the scientific method involved learning how to pose deep questions about the sources of conditions, as well as how to analyze complex problems.

When she returned to Kenya after college, she arrived with a commitment to use the education she had received in America for the development of a newly independent Kenya. As she listened to and observed people, she began to understand that the different issues they were dealing with shared root causes. Colonialism had stripped Kenyans of those things that allowed them to live harmoniously with each other and the environment for thousands of years.

As her tree planting campaign unfolded, it became apparent to Maathai that a broader approach to adult education was needed and could be used to help rural women understand the root causes of the environmental issues they faced.

It suddenly became clear. Not only was the livestock industry threatened by a deteriorating environment, but I, my children, my students, my fellow citizens, and my entire country would pay the price. The connection between the symptoms of environmental degradation and their causes—deforestation, devegetation, unsustainable agriculture and soil loss—were self-evident. We could not just deal with the manifestations of the problems. We had to get to the root causes of those problems. (Maathai 2007b, 125)

As the Green Belt Movement developed, I became convinced that we needed to identify the roots of the disempowerment that plagued the Kenyan people. We had to understand why we were losing firewood; why there was
malnutrition, scarcity of clean water, topsoil loss, and erratic rains; why people could not pay school fees; and why the infrastructure was falling apart. Why were we robbing ourselves of a future? (173)

In working with these rural women, Maathai began to see more directly the linkages between poverty and the environment and between governance and poverty. She began to articulate her view that a degraded environment is a human rights issue, as well as a governance issue: “However, I quickly realized that the rural women I was working with were talking about basic rights and those without such rights are the poor” (Maathai 2007a). In response she expanded the educational approach to include teaching about root causes of environment problems; to respond to the question she poses in the film Taking Root, “Why did we deforest our country?”

To do so it is important to have a holistic approach to our work. That is why in the Green Belt Movement we take care of the environment but we also deal with governance issues, human rights and issues of equitable distribution of resources. (Maathai 2007a)

This perspective that environment, human rights, and governance are intimately linked became central to her message and that of the Green Belt Movement. Adult education in the GBM reflected her belief that people need to understand root causes of issues and oppressive systems in order to create change. In Kenya, as in many places around the globe, a root cause of the oppressive systems in place in the 1970s, when the Movement was getting started, was colonialism. Colonialism and the neocolonialism that followed were rooted in racist and imperialistic ideologies. Maathai used adult education for social action as a means to expose and to challenge the root causes of exploitation.

We wrote about how the environment in the 3rd world countries is destroyed with the full knowledge and support of the developed countries, who support dictators, and do business with them and hold the poor people to account. (Merton and Dater 2008)
Years later, when the Movement had begun to address structural, political change related to the Moi government, adult education was used to help people understand the ways in which those with power can use many different means to maintain their power, including violence.

Around the time of tribal clashes . . . we started the seminars so we could really see the causes of these clashes, why are they occurring? Held hundreds of seminars, met with elders, trying to appeal them to agree to not engage because this is not an ethnic conflict, it is a politically instigated conflict. (Merton and Dater 2008)

As her educational philosophy evolved, the programming of the GBM reflected a commitment to helping people understand root causes in terms of both structure and agency, that is, the ways in which structures were oppressive and the ways people would oppress themselves. “The Green Belt Movement had provided a laboratory of sorts to experiment with a holistic approach to development that dealt with problems on the ground but also examined and addressed their individual and systemic causes” (Maathai 2007b, 255).

**Culturally Grounded Education**

It is significant that Maathai maintained her commitment to her own cultural grounding in spite of various efforts to replace it. It is a testament not just to her character, but also to the power of her Kikuyu heritage. As a young person, she was sent away to schools that were run by non-African nuns. The structure, curriculum, and cultures in those schools were decidedly Eurocentric, yet she maintained her strong connection to her Kikuyu and Kenyan roots. She often credits her experiences in these schools, from primary through college, as being significant in forming her beliefs and values. Her ability to not essentialize particular experiences and to live with the tension of certain contradictions contributes to her strength as a leader. It gave her a fuller understanding of the human experience. It means she personally embodies or at least
understands multiple worldviews, and this capacity is one she relies on to communicate with
people and to engage them from their own center.

The Green Belt Movement itself was inherently culturally grounded, because it aimed to
restore and renew what had been lost during colonialism.

In addition, I saw how important culture was to the larger goals of the Green Belt
Movement and to managing our natural resources efficiently, sustainably, and
equitably. Many aspects of the cultures of our ancestors practiced had protected
Kenya’s environment . . . We integrated the question of culture into our seminars
and eventually wondered whether culture was a missing link in Africa’s
development. (Maathai 2007b, 175)

In her book, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience*
(Maathai 2006), she shares some lessons learned from her experience, including those that reflect
her beliefs about the purposes of adult education. When she talks about community development,
she addresses the way adult education should be culturally relevant. To enable community-based
solutions to community-identified issues, the community must be in control of the effort.
Initiatives must address needs the community feels are essential, not luxurious. It is the
community who will be able to determine which approaches are acceptable and practical
(Maathai 2006, 82), as well as make sense. For example, talking about climate change may seem
too remote for rural women, but a focus on uses of local biodiversity and native, as opposed to
exotic, species may have direct relevance to people’s lives. An example of an initiative that was
not vetted by the communities involved, and that failed, encouraged women use donkeys to carry
water. Traditionally local people had never used donkeys for that purpose and so the effort did
not make sense to them.

Not long after we returned to Nairobi, I learned that the members of the
community had decided that the donkeys could be better used and that the women
could continue to collect the water! I knew that without the donkeys there would
never be enough water to sustain the trees. This showed me that we needed to
make local people feel invested in the projects so they would mobilize themselves.
and their neighbors to take responsibility for sustaining them. It also demonstrated to me that aspects of people’s lives such as culture are very important: You may think you are doing the right thing, but in the local context, you are completely off track. (Maathai 2007b, 133)

Although well intentioned, the failed effort taught Maathai that grassroots initiatives must be led and designed by local people (85).

*Liberatory Adult Education*

Agency, from an Africentric perspective, speaks to centering African people in their own story and the capacity to act and speak in one’s own name. Within the Africentric worldview, individuality does not exist without the collective; I am because we are. Therefore, when we speak of one’s ability to act and speak in one’s own name from an Africentric perspective, it involves acting and speaking on behalf of all African peoples. Africentric social change is dependent upon this notion of agency in that social change becomes a process rather than a goal.

Maathai’s commitment to agency draws from a deep understanding of what was lost or suppressed through European domination. Indeed, she suggests both implicitly and explicitly that the African knowledge base holds answers for how to live justly, sustainably, and harmoniously.

People who are colonized lose a lot of knowledge that accumulated all through the ages in the food they eat, in the way they prepare it, in the way they pass the art of agriculture to the next generation, because we lose the values that we associated with that natural world. We are in denial. We are still denying who we are. We are still denying our roots. (Merton and Dater 2008)

While she states her original goal did not involve more than teaching women to plant trees, she also knew on a deeper level that tree planting was connected to liberation. This is because she understood that the root causes of environmental degradation in Kenya were ultimately rooted in racism and the Eurocentric worldview brought by colonialism: “You cannot protect the
environment unless you empower people; you inform and make them understand their resources are their own” (Merton and Dater 2008).

Aside from teaching about the technical dimensions of running a tree nursery, there was a need to address the mis-education that had occurred in over one hundred years of colonial domination. Re-education became part of the educational strategy of the Green Belt Movement and was used to empower women by introducing them to liberatory concepts. Maathai wanted to teach the women how to look for root causes, to decide on action based on those, and to understand relevant history related to poverty and corruption.

I came to realize that poverty is a symptom of injustices, which become entrenched in the governance systems we adopt. I came to realize that a lot of poverty is man-made. Often, those in power invent excuses to justify the causes of poverty. They create governance systems that exclude, exploit, oppress and humiliate those who are perceived to be weak and vulnerable. That is what colonialism, apartheid, occupation, dictatorships and other unjust forms of governance are about.

Unless the victims of such systems understand why they are so governed, they can easily succumb and make little efforts to challenge systems that deliberately impoverish them. One of the most important responsibilities we have is to empower victims of such injustices so that eventually they can liberate themselves. (Maathai 2007a)

A specific educational program called Civic and Environmental Education was developed and focused on empowerment, democratic principles for civic action, and organizing for environmental conservation. The program operated primarily through community-based seminars. These seminars were culturally grounded in that they employed African-centered approaches to education. The program became a primary site for liberatory adult education in the Movement, and was founded on a belief that “you cannot enslave a mind that knows itself, that values itself, that understands itself” (Merton and Dater 2008).

As this book reflects, my life’s work evolved into much more than planting trees. Two organizations that I founded, the Green Belt Movement and its sister group, the Green Belt Movement International, demonstrate that evolution. By planting
trees, my colleagues in this grassroots movement and I planted ideas. The ideas, like the trees, grew. By providing education, access to water, and equity, GBM empowers people—most of them poor and most of them women—to take action, directly improving the lives of individuals and families. (Maathai 2007b)

An outgrowth of the Civic and Environmental Education program was the development of an empowerment center designed to house experiential, adult liberatory education activities.

_The Common Good_

Maatian anthropology addresses “the teachability of humans” in part through its perspective on Moral Wisdom. This anthropology speaks to the purposes of education and learning as being intended to serve the common good.

It is also important to note that learning is directed toward wisdom and that wisdom in ancient Egypt is _moral wisdom in the service of social and human good_. It thus is the wisdom of Maat in the spiritual, ethical and social sense. It requires listening, learning and doing what is right. (Karenga 2006, 237)

From this perspective learning must encompass more than knowing, for knowing does not compel action. Thus learning must encompass the development of wisdom. Wisdom involves an ethical understanding of what is known, and whether what is known is good for, or in the interest of the community.

Defining the moral and social significance of wisdom, he [Ptahhotep] poses it as morally compelling for parents to teach the moral and social lessons to their children which they themselves were taught so that the children may walk in the “ways of the ancestors,” i.e., the way of Maat. Moreover, they are to be examples of righteous living for practice is the concrete lesson…Teaching and learning, then, are acts of moral cultivation in community. Knowledge here is essentially a moral concept involving knowledge of right and wrong, knowledge of self. (237)

Education that cultivates wisdom must serve the community and seek to nourish the good society. The good society is one in which righteous living is cultivated and attained.

_(The Geru Maa)_ Teaching and learning have two fundamental purposes: to cultivate the Maatian person and create and sustain the Maatian community. The
process is a dialectical one in which a good society cultivates the good person and
the good person creates and sustains the good society. (239)

Maathai recognized early on the privilege her education provided her and felt a
commitment and a responsibility to use that education on behalf of her community and
the larger world.

The privilege of a higher education, especially outside Africa, broadened my
horizons and was responsible for my deeper understanding of the linkages
between the environment, women and development. It was this education that
also helped me understand the value of working for the greater common good of
communities. I was myself a beneficiary of the common concern of others and,
once successful, wanted to improve the quality of life of those I had left behind, in
my country, in particular, and in the African region in general. The foreign
experience deepened my spirituality rather than my religion and encouraged me to
seek God in myself and in others, rather than in the heavens. It gave me values
worth pursuing and sharing. (Maathai 2006, 91)

When I left the United States, I was taking back to Kenya five and a half
years of higher education, as well as a belief that I should work hard, help the
poor, and watch out for the weak and vulnerable. I know that I wanted to teach in
a university and share what I had learned about biology. (Maathai 2007b, 95)

As a person with a commitment to the common good, she felt that every person had a
responsibility to offer what he or she could on behalf of serudj-ta (restoration).

Education, if it means anything, should not take people away from the land, but
instill in them even more respect for it, because educated people are in a position
to understand what is being lost. The future of the planet concerns all of us, and
all of us should do what we can to protect it. As I told the foresters, and the
women, you don’t need a diploma to plant a tree. (138)

One of the ways in which Maathai used her education was to educate others through both
formal and informal means.

Chapter Summary

This chapter focused on Wangari Maathai’s philosophy and how it informed her
approach to adult education. While Maathai’s philosophy grew out of her own experiences and
beliefs, it also draws from deep historical African antecedents. Maathai did not consciously
adopt a Maatian philosophy rather I use it in this analysis of her leadership because her ideas and actions reflect Maatian beliefs, values, and principles. Maat, the moral and philosophical ideal of ancient Kemet (now known as Egypt) is a holistic framework that speaks explicitly to the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and the divine. As a moral ideal it calls for application of the philosophy in daily life, and provides guidance for living in right relationship. The guidance is rooted in a commitment to reciprocity in relationships and in standing worthy before nature and people. Maat offers an environmental ethic based on principles that reflect the interconnectedness of humans, nature and the divine. Maathai’s philosophy reflects these principles of unity, filial guardianship, shared heritage, restoration, and obligation to the future. In particular, the principle of restoration (serudj-ta) meshes with her commitments to environmental stewardship and conservation, and more broadly to the reclamation of African knowledge through liberatory re-education.

Maathai’s philosophy is grounded in particular beliefs and values, some of which inform how she practices adult education and what she holds as the primary purposes and goals of education. As the leader of a values-based movement, she had used education to foster particular values. Some of these are her own, which she has shared with others through education. The Green Belt Movement itself has articulated its own values publicly.

In GBM, the importance of values is emphasized even though many people have yet to embrace the values of the organization. However, there remains a conscious effort to inculcate them in those who subscribe to the Green Belt Movement—whether in the secretariat or out in the field. These values are partly responsible not only for the original inspiration but also for the energy that sustains the organization. (Maathai 2006, 91)

The beliefs and values informing her practice include the following: knowledge is socially constructed; people are inherently good; we have a responsibility to take care of each other, local, indigenous and gendered knowledge are valuable; and democracy requires participation.
Perhaps Maathai’s strongest and most consistent message about the purposes and goals of education is that it should be used to help people understand root causes. In postcolonial contexts, as in Kenya, a related and equally powerful purpose is that education be used for liberation. The root cause of many problems Maathai addressed through her programming ultimately was racism. Racism in part led to colonialism, which led to the de-centering of African knowledge and ways of life as well as the introduction of a dualistic and exploitive worldview. Her unique approach to liberatory adult education was that it also be restorative, that it embodies the principles of serudj-ta. Thus, in the context in which she was working, another goal of education was that it be culturally grounded in relation to those she served. Lastly, in the spirit of African agency, the application of her philosophy was to serve the common good.
Chapter 4. Adult Education in the Green Belt Movement: Culture is Coded Wisdom

(Photo by Mary Davidson, 2009 Kenya; Courtesy of The Green Belt Movement)
Introduction

Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement employ adult education as a primary tool for achieving both environmental and social change within the context of culturally grounded community development. Adult education activities and programs within the Movement are both liberatory and restorative. They are liberatory in that they foster African agency and self-determination through capacity building and valuing local and indigenous knowledge. They are restorative in that they focus on reclaiming, renewing, and restoring natural and human environments toward health and balance. Primary examples of adult education in the Green Belt Movement include tree planting, food security and water harvesting, Civic and Environmental Education, Pan-African Network, advocacy, and Green Belt Safaris.

Sites of Liberatory Adult Education

While the tree-planting campaign remained a cornerstone of the Green Belt Movement’s activities, it has grown to encompass much more. This section will describe GBM’s liberatory adult education, taken from Maathai’s book *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (2006). We begin with an examination of the vision and mission guiding the Movement.

THE VISION: To create a society of people who consciously work for continued improvement of their livelihoods and a greener, cleaner Kenya.

The key elements in this vision are that people must first understand and internalize the linkage between environmental degradation and unsustainable livelihoods so as to make conscious efforts—driven by strong felt needs and convictions—to improve their livelihoods through environmental conservation.

THE MISSION: To mobilize community consciousness for self-determination, equity, improved livelihood securities and environmental conservation using trees as an entry point. (112)
The mission statement contains two key elements: first, environmental conservation must go hand-in-hand with poverty eradication; and second, people must be helped to understand their status and that of their surroundings and then empowered to take responsibility for their own destiny rather than wait for others to make the determination. This mission and vision inform all activities of the Movement. They reflect a Maatian orientation of addressing the relationship between humans and nature and a commitment to serudj-ta in their focus on restoration.

Tree Planting Program

This was the first initiative Maathai started in response to expressed needs by rural women in Kenya in the late 1970s. They were concerned about two issues. The first was that the low supply of wood meant that it needed to be used sparingly, resulting in forced dietary changes to foods that took less time to cook. Malnutrition resulted, because “in many cases, this [was] done without regard to, or knowledge of, how the changes affected the overall quality of the diet” (Maathai 2006, 35). Second, women were traveling long distances to fetch wood because close sources were not replenished. Stripping trees also resulted in loss of biodiversity and clean available water. These additional environmental problems exasperated the issue of fuel wood. In response these problems, Maathai began to teach women to plant trees.

The tree-planting program taught a specific methodology that included ten steps to guide communities in setting up nurseries. The ten steps were always translated into local languages. The tree-planting program had the following objectives (Maathai 2006, 35–40).

1. To help community members establish a sustainable source of wood fuel

In many parts of the less industrialized and less consuming world, more than 90 percent of the rural population are poor and therefore depend on inexpensive and readily available forms of fuel for cooking and warming their homes. The tree-planting project addressed such problems
by encouraging communities to plant trees to replenish what they use and also to use energy saving technologies.

2. To generate income for rural women

After women’s groups issued seedlings to their communities free of charge, they were required to conduct a follow-up (i.e. extension services) after the first and third month to ascertain survival of the seedlings. In order to compensate them for the time that they spent tending to the nurseries and doing extension work, GBM purchased all of the seedlings issued by the groups that were surviving in the third month.

3. To promote environmental consciousness among the youth

Since the youth are the decision makers of the future, it was deemed important to expose and involve them in issues of environmental conservation. In this respect, GBM sensitized the youth to the environment by establishing public tree nurseries in schools.

4. To empower people at the grassroots

In Phase I, the Green Belt Movement depended on those at the grassroots to carry out work on the ground. Therefore, it was found increasingly important for the headquarters to delegate some of the managerial duties to tree-nursery members to increase efficiency. These duties included record keeping, accounting for funds, decision making on tree nursery management, organizing activities (e.g. meetings) and providing leadership. Community members who carried out these duties gained a lot of experience and are now applying these skills in other capacities, including positions of leadership within the community. GBM views individual and communal empowerment as an important aspect of development because it is, in many cases, the mind-set from which people begin to realize their potential.

5. To demonstrate the capacity of women in development
In a nation where women’s roles are commonly perceived as subordinate, GBM found it important to raise awareness—both in rural and urban areas—of the willingness, ability and capacity of women to play leading roles in communal, regional and national development.

6. To curb soil erosion

Land is one of Kenya’s most important natural resources. During the rainy seasons, thousands of tons of topsoil are eroded from Kenya’s countryside by rivers and washed into the oceans and lakes. Losing topsoil should be considered analogous to losing territory to an invading enemy. And indeed, if any country were so threatened, it would mobilize all available resources, including a heavily armed military, to protect the priceless land. Fortunately, with simple preventative measures, soil erosion can be greatly reduced. GBM trained community members to apply inexpensive techniques such as planting appropriate species of trees, maintaining vegetative cover on the land, creating windbreaks, digging trenches, constructing terraces, making cut-off drains, and protecting forests and catchment areas from indiscriminate exploitation.

7. To disseminate information on environmental conservation

In order to train communities to become good custodians of the environment, GBM found it crucial for them to understand the causes and effects of environmental problems. Through such forums as seminars and meetings, many environment-related problems were identified and discussed. These problems include sustained hunger, malnutrition, widespread poverty, unemployment, overpopulation, energy crisis, soil erosion, lack of clean drinking water, lack of building materials, lack of animal fodder, drought and desertification. Out of the discussions, problems that could be tackled through tree planting were listed and possible actions outlined for the participants to implement.
A later objective of the program included tree planting on public land, which included institutional grounds, reserves, urban centers, degradation hotspots, and sites of cultural significance. The Green Belt Movement provided the resources and the training for these efforts. The purpose of planting on public land was to inculcate a culture of planting indigenous trees as a means for beautifying the countryside, reclaiming denuded areas, and preventing further environmental degradation (Maathai 2006, 113).

Civic and Environmental Education

Along with the tree-planting program, the Green Belt Movement has become best known for its Civic and Environmental Education (CEE) program. A detailed description of this program is included to illustrate the application of Maathai’s philosophy in an adult education program that explicitly links environmental problems with their social dimensions. This program grew out of Maathai’s observation of the interconnectedness between environmental care and civic engagement. The primary purpose of this program was to “raise awareness of primary environmental care and enhance knowledge, attitudes and values that support sustainable grassroots socio-economic and ecological welfare” (Maathai 2006, 117). Maathai describes this program as “a people’s education scheme: It is education toward being a responsible citizen in all matters affecting individual and communal livelihood” (117–118). The main subjects covered in this program include environmental conservation, basic human rights, knowing one’s roots (culture), good governance, GBM values, issues of equity, the value of our natural resource base, and our responsibility today towards future generations. In addition to these core subject areas, the program grew to include curricula on international aid, poverty, unemployment, and population. Thus CEE became a program to empower people at the grassroots to participate in democracy.
At the seminars, local people were able to question leaders and politicians and organize themselves within their communities. In this way, we adapted the Green Belt Movement’s approach to embedding decision-making at the local level and made sure the communities claimed ownership of their needs and aspirations. (Maathai 2007b, 234)

The program employed a number of different methods and educational activities, with community-based seminars and teach-ins as the mainstay. A regular radio program, leaflets and printed materials, audiocassettes of lectures on civic education, local civic education units, and school environmental education projects supplemented the seminars. All of these activities were culturally grounded and locally relevant.

Our insistence on people being able to speak their local languages was revolutionary. Over time, this approach evolved into the “civic and environmental education” seminars that became part and parcel of the Green Belt Movement’s work. In the early 1990s, the seminars expanded in scope to include an examination of the recent history of Kenya and how forests and land had been used and distributed in the colonial era and after independence. We also looked at issues of democracy, human rights, gender and power. (Maathai 2007b, 174)

This program, like other educational efforts of GBM, placed a high value on culture and spiritually because: “they link[ed] people with their roots” (Maathai 2006, 48). Maathai felt this was necessary because the cultural values and systems of indigenous Kenyans were eroded, trivialized, and deliberately destroyed in the process of colonization. As a result, many Kenyans became less appreciative of the environment because they perceived it as a commodity to be privatized and exploited.

Even after colonization, it is unfortunate that cultural values still continue to be suppressed today in the name of modernization, civilization and Christianity. The restoration of positive spiritual and cultural values is important since these contribute toward restoration of individual self-confidence, empowerment and identity. The restoration is also important in the protection of indigenous biological diversity, knowledge, practices and wisdom. (Maathai 2006, 48)
In this way, the Civic and Environmental Education program was a liberatory program, with a larger goal of re-centering African knowledge and values. An outcome of this program was a redefinition of development from an Africentric perspective.

Although there were set subject areas, seminars always started with issues that were generated by the participants. In a facilitated manner, the group would identify what problems were being faced in the community, where those problems came from, and some possible solutions (Maathai 2007a). The seminars addressed human and environmental rights such as those issues affecting farmers (economic injustice) or reproductive rights for women and girls.

The seminars helped farmers gain an understanding of how they were being exploited so that they could more effectively advocate for justice. During the seminars, these issues were raised and deliberated upon. Both men and women were encouraged to hold open dialogues amongst themselves as a way of searching for workable solutions to the issue. (Maathai 2006, 49)

The seminars became a venue for participants to engage with each other around relevant issues of the day. This included elections, land tenure, and ethnic violence.

We wanted to offer the public a space to learn about the opposition, give their opinions, ask questions, and engage with people of different views. To do this, we hit on the concept of “teach-ins.” . . . I drew on my American experience of the teach-ins of the 1960s. By this time I had also been holding seminars with Green Belt groups for years and I enjoyed leading group discussions. I led a number of teach-ins in a tent in downtown Nairobi to raise Kenyans’ awareness about why it was so important for us to come together and reclaim our democracy at the ballot box. (Maathai 2007b, 231)

When the ethnic violence began leading up to the 1992 elections, Maathai began hosting town-hall meetings, open forums and church gatherings focused on fair elections. The regime perceived this as a threat to their power, and so she began hosting the seminars in her home at night. These were well attended, sometimes up to fifty people at time, and mostly men: “We coordinated a series of seminars to educate people about the upcoming elections and translated materials about the elections and the opposition parties’ platforms into local languages to make
them more accessible to ordinary people” (233–34). During this period, once when the police were sent to break up the seminars, she boldly told the young officers, “We’re trying to liberate you too, because you’re also being misused . . . The law that says we can’t meet if we’re more than nine is a colonial law, an oppressive law. These are the laws we are trying to change so we can meet in our own houses, in our own country, without anybody telling us how many people can be here” (233).

To understand in more depth the content of the Civic and Environmental Education program, a description of one of their seminars held in Kangari, Kenya, in April 2005, is provided below. This seminar was filmed and transcribed as part of the documentary, Taking Root. The seminar begins with a blessing, prayer, and an invocation. The participants are provided an outline of the seminar, which is written in English but reviewed in Gikuyu (the local language). Throughout the seminar, all activities occur in both Gikuyu and English so that all participants are able to communicate effectively. The description that follows is organized according to the seminar format.

Welcome, introductions, climate setting, seminar objectives, and participant expectations

GBM educators begin the seminar with a welcome, and by identifying who was in attendance. There are representatives from local government (community development advisory and forester), representatives from the church, community group representatives (single mothers group). The GBM educators running the seminar include Karangathi, Kinyanjui, and Wamucii. Karangathi leads the introductions:

We have gathered together to have discussions about the things that affect our lifestyles and how we would like to live them. We will be looking at how to improve our situation not just for ourselves but also for the generations to come.
The value of each person’s contribution is discussed, how it is valid based on what he or she has witnessed and what he or she knows, and how sharing experiences is what can lead to positive change.

Many times people are so busy they don’t find time to just sit together and hold conversations. When we are together you bring the knowledge you have and I bring my knowledge and we put it together—it helps us so that we can develop together ways of improving our lives.

He asks guidance from the group on how to moderate as they come “together as a family” stating, “I need to be guided on how we are going to manage our learning and teaching together.” He requests a timekeeper and a person who will lead the prayers, energizers, or songs. He acknowledges that the participants have come with expectations, and the group is invited to share these with each other. He writes these on a board for all to see, and are repeated aloud as they are written. There is opportunity for everyone who wants to offer something to do so. Some of the questions people have come with to this seminar include

- I would like to know where I can get seeds for planting trees.
- I also wanted to know if we would receive the seeds to plant the trees and then how to get to a market for selling the seedlings.
- When I heard about the process of civic education I thought I would like to know about the process of self-governance.
- I want to know how the Green Belt Movement operates.
- I wanted to know how the groups from my area would be helped or assisted.
- I have a message from the women in my group. How can we assist the orphans and the children are vulnerable if there are many?
- How can we reduce poverty in the land?
- How to replant the indigenous forests and how to stop the destructive cutting of the trees in the forest now . . . replant the indigenous forest that will harmonize the environment and to stop the cutting of trees.
- To know about the registration process of being a member of GBM.
- I want to know how we as the community can work in collaboration with the forest department to maintain the forest that is close to us.
- [From this collaboration want] to plant trees and how the community can benefit from the natural heritage of the forest.
Karangathi shares with the group that issues of governance, local community and national, will be covered in the seminar. He shares that GBM’s approach is to create the specific agenda with the group in the seminar, but that broadly, “we will be having discussions about our human and physical environments” and that “we are focusing on improved living standards, not just for ourselves but even for the generations that will follow us.”

**Workshop Introduction of the Green Belt Movement**

After identifying interest areas of the group, Kinyanjui then leads a conversation that poses the question about why women’s groups form but not men’s groups. He grounds in a narrative of daily life that reflects how people tend to seek each other out and unite when there are problems.

What are some of the reasons that men are not forming into groups? And those are the reasons need to look at as we start to think, what is our direction? What way do we want to go? Maybe we, the men, it looks like we don’t like to acknowledge the problems and challenges in our families. We sum it up and say, ah! Those are women’s issues.

He then describes a scenario that is common to many in the room, that has to do with how women generally create the home, purchase everything in it, and take care of it, yet the men benefit from it.

But you go and drink that money and you come home, and when you reach the door you want to boast, “Doesn’t anyone know, this is my home!” “And yet, deep within you know, that if she made a decision, you would have to go. There is no item in your house which you can say you purchased and own. Then you make believe that you are the head, even when you know you are not.

He uses this to illustrate how there are many issues or problems that people live with daily that do not get discussed, and therefore do not improve.

So if people are not acknowledging problems, then they don’t have reason to organize themselves for action. So we need to organize and sit together like we are doing now and ask ourselves, what are our problems, what are our challenges?
This sets the stage for a larger conversation about the history and role of missionaries and colonials in de-centering Kenyan people. He begins with a commentary on the way missionaries used the church.

Sometimes also even going to church you are singing and you have been taught not to think about the challenges and problems of this world because you are waiting to go to heaven.

When you are praying with your thoughts and your mind looking up, bla, bla, bla, you are not thinking about the problems in your life on earth.

So sing with me, “This world is not mine, I am just passing through…

“All my joys are in heaven, where all of the children have already gone before me. Therefore I am not even thinking about the home I have on earth.”

No matter how maybe problems will multiply around me.

So you are almost saying to God, even if the problems multiply, and you have a free will given to you by God, you will make a decision not to think about or act on the problems.

But the same book teaches us, ask and you shall receive, knock-knock, and it will be opened.

And we also know that when we gather in song, it is a form of prayer.

And what you ask God, God will give. So you are telling God, this world is not my home.

So even if your tea harvest money is stolen,
So the tea is growing on this earth which is not your home, so maybe you need to go plant more tea, up there! (Heaven)

He continues with some history of how the Green Belt Movement got started by sharing the process the National Council of Women of Kenya started, with identifying and prioritizing problems. But then he says, “So before thinking about solutions, we have to think about the root causes of the problems.” He describes how the women did this by identifying disease as a local problem. As they thought more deeply about it, and backed up their thinking to investigate root causes, they noted a change in people’s diets. The change was to replace indigenous foods with starchy processed foods.

They realized that these foods generate heat and energy only. They found that this change occurred at the same time that cash crops like tea and coffee were introduced which generate only money for farmers. Because of the idea of making money, we have planted all our farms almost entirely with cash crops. So our
lifestyle changes. Instead of growing our foods, we made decisions to make money instead and go and buy our food from the stores.

Kinyanjui teaches more history related to the colonial-based root causes of these problems, and the implications of those historical choices.

From the time the white people came, and occupied our land, and grabbed land and planted their own crops, like rice, and tea and coffee . . . they shifted totally from the way our people had grown crops for their own use. They made us believe that all those food crops that our people had lived on were primitive and un-civilized, and we allowed that to happen. We did not realize what the white man was doing. He had started by taking over our lands.

However, the white man’s way of thinking was very creative in creating a market for his product. Like for example, he planted wheat, and he needed to create a market for his wheat products. The European farmer was very quick to create markets. Just like the way one of the participants here wanted help finding a market for selling tea. Did you plant tea without first finding a market? The European would not do that. He would not start planting crops without first identifying a market. So when they planted all those crops, they were not intended to be taken overseas. They were intended to be consumed here in Kenya. The attitude that came with this was that all of our indigenous and natural food crops that our people had lived on were termed useless and undeveloped, and they promoted the foods that the European produced.

Kinyanjui talks about how the how the British introduced refined foods through baby formula, which was processed and refined. The use of baby formulas replaced the indigenous knowledge women had about how diet is used to build strong immune systems and protect children from disease. So when the women began to notice disease, diet and nutrition became a focal point. And they asked why people started eating these processed foods.

Along with the new plantation agriculture and cash economy, the British needed to develop infrastructure to move goods from one place to another.

So the European had to create ways to ensure that their products produced on one side of the country would reach the consumers on the other side. And he also had to package his food to send back home to Europe so that his people could see that he was successful in his new land. Because when they left Europe, they had planned where they wanted to settle. But as soon as they landed here on your
land, and grabbed it, they taught you to think about where you will also go (Heaven).

He explains how the British introduced railroads to transport goods across the country, and how they realized if they used indigenous wood to fuel the train, they would run out of fuel quickly. This was because indigenous trees grow slowly. In order to keep up with the demand of the market they had created, they planted a non-native species called the Blue Gum tree.

So they decided to plant the Blue Gum tree. What do you call that tree here? Munyua-Mai (That Which Drinks a lot of Water). We started planting it everywhere. Even places where our people would grow crops that required a lot of water like arrowroots, bananas.

He describes the historical implications of replacing cropland with non-native trees, and how that directly affected water, biodiversity, production of indigenous food crops and a host of other environmental conditions.

We did not sit down first and consult and discuss how and where to plant these trees. So even where our land was very productive and we would grow our food, the water level decreased significantly because those trees required so much water to grow. So now, where these trees are planted we have reduced water levels, so much so that if we want to go back to eating the foods our ancestors ate, we have to go to the marketplace to buy them. Even the lowlands where we would have watershed are all dried up.

The transition into colonial domination resulted in changed social and cultural conditions, all of which served the interests of the British:

So for the Europeans, they had their reasons for planting these trees. And we, we also realized these trees are good for business. At that same time, the colonialists decided to govern and control us. At the same time also, the missionary was also giving us information about our living styles, about the way we lived here, that it is not acceptable to have more than one wife for example, and yet our people had plenty of resources to take care of their families. The people had property, they had huge farms, and they had cattle and sheep and goats, and with that kind of wealth a man could have more than ten, even more than twenty wives and there was nothing wrong before their own God.
Kinyanjui explains that the British realized, in spite of their indoctrination, that the Kenyans would not abandon the tradition of polygamy, and so they introduced a form of taxation called a “hut-tax,” which required a man to pay taxes on each wife’s hut. The Kenyans were told that the tax had to be paid in money (not sheep or goats).

So the colonialist demanded cash payment for this tax. And this money is the same money the colonialist had introduced. The settlers had this money. So the men had to organize how to go out and seek wage labor in the settlers’ tea, coffee, and cattle farms.

He explains that a significant implication of the hut tax was that men would usually take down their own hut (to cut expenses) because the hut tax was on the wives’ huts. The man’s hut however is “where he would have been sitting holding conversations with his male children.” So what happened was that the men and sons relocated to the women’s homes. This created changed dynamics.

At the end of this history, Kinyanjui brings it back to the current conversation, and the tradition from which the Green Belt Movement grew:

So, we go back again to the NCWK. Having looked at this larger picture, they started asking the question, what do you want to do about this? What do we do to heal this situation? Is planting the trees going to be a solution?

The women recognized that the implications of the cash economy were far reaching. People had made many adaptations to address the lack of fuel wood (changed diets, use of kerosene, etc.) all of which required the money made from producing the cash crops. And the money they made was nominal. So the women decided to address the root problem by planting trees. They decided to call it The Green Belt Movement, and would spread the word by mouth, “like a chain of events, we would pass on information. For example the whole of Kigumo would know about the Movement through word of mouth.” Kinyanjui finishes telling the story of the Movement and how it got started from humble beginnings.
The content for this part of the curriculum reflects Wangari Maathai’s belief that history is important to understand root causes. As well, it illustrates the actions Maathai inspired in others through her leadership.

**Problem identification**

The next activity, led by Wamucii, involves issue identification and sharing. She calls for the group to find a different word than *problem* to define these in a way that allowed for their resolution. The group came up with *gacagaca*, which means “endless trouble and confusion.” She asks the group to consider why they should come together, and the group identifies reasons. In small groups, the participants name and list their sources of gacagaca. Larger systemic issues are raised when digging deeper into issues like unemployment, which participants decide has to do with a cultural shift toward disdain of agriculture, or how people come into villages to get new crops started and then leave (exploitation), or finance, or poor infrastructure. After each group generates a list, they report out to the whole.

**Wrong bus syndrome**

The metaphor of the wrong bus is used to help participants understand how they lost their way. This is taught using story; pretending participants are on a journey. In the story, the listeners get on a bus thinking and hoping they are going to one location, but find up that the bus they got on is going to all sorts of other places. They are asked, “What would make you get on a bus going the wrong way?” There is discussion about failing to ask questions, pretending to know it all, being illiterate, getting overwhelmed, being impatient, not paying attention, being misled, being afraid, and other reasons. In short, the reasons put forward are mostly reasons for which a person can take responsibility. After a lengthy discussion, the facilitator talks about “self
knowledge” and encourages participants to ask questions, to be self aware, to not wait for God to deliver them but to take responsibility for going in the direction they want.

At the point where they say that God sent prophet Hosea, “They started searching for self knowledge, and when they gained self knowledge it was at that point that they stepped out of slavery.”

The purpose of this lesson is to get participants thinking about the role they play in creating the conditions they want in their lives, and to inspire people to ask questions, seek information, and know themselves so they are not misled.

Classification of problems according to causes

This activity begins with reviewing the lists each group had generated and then grouping them by category. Some of the categories were easy to name, such as governance, environmental issues, wealth, diseases, and social problems. Others, such as what people had labeled as education, require probing to really understand the issue. Then the groups identify problems within each category, such as corruption under governance. Participants are encouraged to be very specific in how they name things.

With each problem identified, participants are asked to name the causes, such as “greed” or “lack of fairness” for corruption. Once the causes are named, participants are asked to discuss what they want to do in order to deal with the causes. In the groups, participants explore the issues, root causes, and possible solutions. The seminar leaders encourage solutions that draw on local and indigenous knowledge, and on culturally grounded understandings of environmental management, governance, and health. At the end of this exercise the participants have a list of ideas and strategies for solving their problems. The remainder of the seminar devotes time for the following topics: solutions to the problems, environmental conservation and existing policy framework, agricultural challenges, GBM approach to solving problems and green
Food Security and Water Harvesting Program

The food and water security program grew out of concern by local women about malnutrition, water scarcity, and water quality. In response, the Green Belt Movement developed an educational program related to food security focused on enhancing the knowledge and skill of farmers related to sustainable farming, productivity, indigenous crops, traditional dietary principles, and variety cropping. The objective of the program was “to assist communities in analyzing and understanding their food security risks and then learning and practicing simple, ecologically friendly initiatives that will enable them to consistently provide enough farm-sourced food, of the right quality and variety for the household” (Maathai 2006, 115).

This program often used experiential learning strategies such as demonstration gardens in order to make the learning relevant and engaging. This curriculum included education about chemical fertilizers, which are expensive for poor farmers and negatively impact soil quality. As well they taught about sustainable alternatives to pest and disease management. The program provided training in different cropping techniques that were environmentally friendly. Education on water harvesting focused on farming techniques and increasing household supply. Water harvesting techniques were taught in seminars, workshops and at demonstration sites. And lastly, the program focused on food production at the household level because cash crop production did not yield enough money to buy food. “They were also encouraged to plant indigenous food crops (roots, cereals, legumes and vegetables) for added nutrient value and conservation of local biological diversity” (Maathai 2006, 45).
Educating communities on the value of traditional foods and wisdom was so important to Wangari Maathai that GBM employed a specific plan to achieve that goal using two primary activities (2006, 45–46). In this first strategy, participants were taught about the nutritional value of indigenous crops as well as ways to cultivate and prepare them. They were encouraged to plant indigenous crops because of their ability to withstand harsh environmental conditions and were taught about the growth habits of the plants. This program included working in schools with youth on the same topics.

The second strategy was to encourage the preservation of traditional knowledge and wisdom regarding agriculture. In African traditional societies, a lot of knowledge and wisdom about the value of various plants has been passed from generation to generation. The organization recognized the value of this information, more so because much of it is still applicable today. GBM therefore encouraged its members to preserve, utilize, and share this knowledge with other community members.

Pan African Network

The Pan African Network was an educational program developed in order to share the work of the Green Belt Movement with other African nations, and to promote “green consciousness” on the continent (Maathai 2006, 54). This effort grew out of a request from the United Nations Environment Programme in 1985 for GBM to share its methodology and experience with other development workers and environmentalists in Africa.

The Green Belt Movement held four workshops between 1986 and 1988 in which over forty-five participants from fifteen sub-Saharan countries were trained. The participants were selected by their affiliation with well-established environmental organizations. The overall goal
of the program was “to raise the consciousness of the participants so that they come to appreciate and actively care for the environment” (Maathai 2006, 105). During the training, participants: learned about various environmental problems, developed their capacity to conceptualize ideas and solutions to problems, learned how to formulate, implement, and evaluate action plans, learned how action plans are used in development initiatives, visited women in the field for practical discussions and demonstrations on their approaches to environmental conservation, discussed approaches to project sustainability, and learned how to write and present proposals, monitor and evaluate projects, manage finances, and establish good donor relations.

Unfortunately the United Nations was not able to provide funds for the necessary follow-up after participants had returned to their countries. The Green Belt Movement also was unable to raise the needed funds because the Kenyan government was sabotaging the effort. The government had already marginalized GBM and was concerned about cross-national organizing. In 1992, the Green Belt Movement held a reunion in Nairobi because they had been unable to travel to the sites where participants were implementing what they learned. As a result of this reunion, the Pan-African Green Network was formed. The network’s charge was “to assist groups and individuals to initiate Green Belt activities or incorporate aspects of its approach into their own ongoing activities” (Maathai 2006, 103). In 1993 they decided to hold another workshop in order to assist other countries that had not participated. The trainings typically lasted two weeks and were supported by the funding agent, Comic Relief.

Although the original aim of these workshops was to have participants replicate the Green Belt Movement in their own countries, it quickly became clear that this was not practical, because not all of the organizations from which participants came had visions and missions that
were similar to the Green Belt Movement (Maathai 2006, 106). As a result, trainers encouraged participants to use only what was relevant and adapt what was useful in their own context.

Advocacy

Through her activism fighting environmental and social injustice, Maathai recognized the need for advocacy and networking in order to strengthen the coalitions and networks of like-minded activists. She formalized her effort to engage in advocacy and networking through an educational effort whose primary objective was “to bring to the national and international limelight actions of poor governance and/or abuse to the environment and then rally people’s resistance to such actions” (Maathai 2006, 119). A strategy central to this effort was to educate people on mass action. This also involved educating people on the role media can play in bringing forward these sorts of injustices.

Over time, Maathai and the Green Belt Movement became increasingly involved in direct political action. She saw it as necessary to adopt political action as a corollary to education, in pursuit of shifting power. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the GBM began to protest the gross mismanagement that prevailed in the government. As part of this effort, members began to advocate against environmental and human rights abuse. In addition to protest activities, much of the community organizing related to teaching people to stand up for their rights. The GBM used seminars as vehicle for this education. Advocacy efforts were also directed against corruption, especially in relation to public land and open spaces that the government continued to illegally allocate to private developers. The Green Belt Movement’s approach to education was to empower people at the grassroots to take responsibility for democratic governance and eventually assume leadership for efforts aimed toward reclaiming democracy.
Rather than lead the way for the local people, GBM only provided support and withdrew as the local people performed their demonstrations. Since most of the participants had undergone civic education, their actions demonstrated the importance of such education as well as the importance of community empowerment in development. (Maathai 2006, 51)

A key message of the program was to help people understand the linkages between environmental issues and poor governance: “Sometimes advocacy is viewed as militancy against governments. However, it must be recognized that many environmental problems are a result of deliberate abuse and a lack of emphasis and commitment to environmental conservation” (119). This program has evolved to include new advocacy activities such as preservation of rare indigenous trees and sites of cultural significance, networking of Pan-African participants, and communication with international supporters through Internet facilities (119–120).

Green Belt Safaris

Green Belt Safaris is the most recent educational program of the Green Belt Movement. This program grew out of a concern that GBM has relied heavily on foreign donors for support, and wanted to shift to a more sustainable approach. In order to manage growth, a business development department was formed to focus on “establishing initiatives through which GBM can earn an income and begin to financially sustain the organization. One such initiative is the Green Belt Safaris, an eco-safari operating company based in Nairobi. The intention is to offer community-based and other eco-tourism packages through which environmental conservation and community development can be promoted” (Maathai 2006, 53).

Green Belt Safaris is an eco-tourism venture that provides organized visits to GBM community projects. Participants stay and work in the community for one week, followed by a few days of conventional tourism. The mission is to offer a unique cultural experience through community home stays where guests enjoy a rich exchange with their host families while
participating in field activities (seed collection, nursery preparation, tree planting, food security/processing and civic education), community projects, harvesting, and meal preparation.

Another opportunity is for participants to engage in a two-week experience that combines participatory discussions with local leaders at the GBM Learning Center, community home stays with GBM groups, and a wilderness excursion. This program also has focus on local culture.

Focusing on culture, the Kenyan experience will explore the various elements of culture: language, food (seeds, preparation, storage, tools, eating habits), clothing, names, songs (dances and music), greetings, symbols, agriculture & wildlife, architecture, tools/technology, rituals (ceremonies, myths, religion), stories, system of governance, traditional medicine (healers, tools), art of writing, and values. All of these attributes, in their collectivity, form an intricate web which gives every community its identity, character, self-pride, self-respect and purpose (www.greenbeltmovement.org).

The community-based safaris and home-stays take place in areas where the Green Belt Movement has been successful in its reforestation and empowerment campaigns.

Chapter Summary

Adult education in the Green Belt Movement started simply as an effort by Wangari Maathai to teach rural women to plant trees. This activity was intended to address the problem women were having with a lack of fuel wood. The lack of wood had led to many other problems, both environmental and social, such as lack of clean water, malnutrition, and soil erosion. Maathai approached tree planting as a collective activity, drawing on the women’s existing and cultural knowledge and on their capacity to teach each other. This tree-planting program included education about tree cultivation as well as the economic aspect of running a nursery.

As we worked with women in the rural areas, we discovered that it was often the poor women who came to work with us, because we made tree planting an income generating activity. However, they needed to understand that they need to take care of their environment, not only because they needed the finances but also because it was in their interest to take care of their environment. (Maathai 2007a)
It was not long before Maathai realized the education needed to be much broader, to help people and communities understand the root causes of the conditions they faced and to empower them through renewal and restoration of cultural values and indigenous knowledge. The Civic and Environmental Education program grew out of this understanding.

Many problems can be solved by us if we can empower ourselves and believe in ourselves. This process became an important part of our work and we called it civic and environmental education. It was the first thing we did whenever we reached a new community. (Maathai 2007a)

This program, primarily through seminars and media dissemination, addressed many issues related to democracy, governance, environmental management, poverty, and health. The Civic and Environmental Education program was perceived as a threat to those in power because it was teaching people how to organize and stand up for their rights. The result of the program was an informed, galvanized, and organized populace that became committed to social action on behalf of the environment and to fair governance and human rights.

Other primary sites of adult education were developed to expand the scope of these initial two program areas. The additional sites include Pan African Network, advocacy and networking programs, food security and water harvesting programs, and Green Belt Safaris, an eco-tourism program.
Chapter 5. Righteous Leadership: Speak Truth to Power

(Photo by Mia MacDonald, October 2004, Kenya; Courtesy of Green Belt Movement)
Introduction

Visionaries are rare. They are different than leaders, although they may also be leaders. Visionaries provide a new way of seeing the world. At a fundamental level they influence how we think and what we believe in. They take us beyond what we know and help us see what is possible. Visionaries have relevance for adult education, a field of practice concerned with thinking, learning, and knowing, in addition to concerns about growth, change, and evolution of consciousness. Wangari Maathai is such a visionary. She provides a new way of seeing the world. Her work challenges our consciousness. Through her message and actions, she suggests that the consciousness that allows exploitation and domination of nature is the same consciousness that allows exploitation and domination of people. Adult education has been central to her project of helping people learn to deconstruct their own lived experience and to identify the roots causes of injustice in all its forms.

Righteous Leadership (Karenga 2006) is a Maatian concept that represents a practical manifestation of this philosophical and moral ideal, and speaks to the modeling and teaching of right relationship. Maathai’s commitment to right relationship informs her work as an environmentalist, human rights, pro-democracy, and peace activist, and liberatory adult educator. Righteous Leadership is predicated on the application of Righteous Commitment (Colin 2008). Maathai’s Righteous Commitment to justice, both human and environmental, led her to develop adult education activities that were ultimately designed for the goal of liberation. Maathai teaches how corrupt governance, racism, and social injustice are connected to exploitation of environment and inequitable management of natural resources.

This chapter is an analysis of the way that Maathai lives Maat through her Righteous Leadership. It presents an application of Maat in current times in which the problems that plague
humanity and the earth are increasingly interconnected and require holistic understandings.

Righteous Commitment

Dr. Scipio Colin introduced the term and concept *Righteous Commitment* to the field of adult education in an interview with Rosemary Closson in 2006. Righteous Commitment is manifested when one accepts risk and is willing to sacrifice personal good for a larger aim. To have a Righteous Commitment means that you believe so deeply in something that you see pursuit of it as the only right thing to do; “You do it because in your heart of hearts you know it’s the right thing to do whether you benefited or not” (Closson 2006, 56). This is true for all people who have Righteous Commitment, however “relative to the African Diaspora, this is grounded commitment” (Colin 2007). For an African person, or member of the African Diaspora, the willingness to sacrifice one’s self fits within the larger philosophical and moral orientation of seeing oneself within the context of self-in-community.

Those who are Righteously Committed get to the point where there may not appear to be other choices. Nelson Mandela, the wise liberatory leader of South Africa, reflects on his life, saying:

> I had no epiphany, no singular revelation, no moment of truth, but a steady accumulation of a thousand slights, a thousand indignities, a thousand unremembered moments produced in me an anger, a rebelliousness, a desire to fight the system that imprisoned my people. There was no particular day on which I said, from henceforth I will devote myself to the liberation of my people; instead, I simply found myself doing so, and could not do otherwise. (Mandela 1994, 95)

This level of commitment is so great that one becomes willing to risk or disregard the personal in pursuit of a larger good. In a personal interview Colin (2008) further describes this aspect of Righteous Commitment:
This is absolutely non-wavering. It’s non-contextual, do you know; it’s not dependent upon a critical mass. This is a higher level of commitment . . . It means that once you’ve processed all information, and you process it through your own moral interpretive frame—and that really is a component of a spiritual context—and then, when you become aware of the right thing to do that has nothing to do with any personal gain, it is the right thing to do. You do it not because of, but in spite of. You don’t do it because other people agree. It is not that critical mass agreement. You don’t do it for personal gain, and it’s a dual action. It’s speaking, and doing, you see? You speak against the wrong, but you also engage in action against the wrong. So, in terms of it being reflective of Righteous Commitment, you can’t do one without the other. There are speakers against the wrong action that never do, because then they engage in a kind of personal cost-benefit analysis, and they’re beseeched with what I call a chameleon conscience, in that depending upon where they are and who’s there, their moral compass shifts.

For Colin, Righteous Commitment is an inherently human quality in that we are all born with the capacity for this deep level of commitment.

I think it is indigenous to all human beings, but it becomes a choice . . . it is Maat because part of it is that processing of information where on one hand you don’t have a knee-jerk reaction, you don’t have an emotional reaction, it’s that deep wisdom, but it’s an individual choice.

I think it’s an indigenous human characteristic that in order to be human is that one has this element of Righteous Commitment, so if one believes that then one must believe that every human being has that capability, but conversely every human being has a choice.

Righteous Commitment requires unwavering dedication to a particular value, person, group, vision, or principle. All actions are consistent with that dedication, regardless of context or outcome.

So, you know righteous leadership not by the outcome, but by the process. You know, my grandmother used to say, “If you really want to know the character of someone you look at how they play the game.” In other words, you look at their actions, and that’s plural, and one of the things you look for is consistency. Has that person been consistent? It’s not just for that one moment.

What follows is a discussion of those Righteous Commitments that have guided much of Maathai’s work. These are principles or goals that she has worked to actualize, has defended, and for which she has even risked her own life.
Equality

The Kikuyu culture in which Wangari Maathai was raised values all people equally. In stark contrast to this, in her formative years she also experienced racist and sexist ideology and structures imposed by the British colonialists and missionaries on the indigenous people of Kenya.

During my years on the farm, I never thought about the fact that Mr. Neylan and his family were white while everyone else was black, and I never heard my parents or other adults talking about it; for them, skin color was not an issue. But we did recognize the differences in our lifestyles and privileges, which were taken as a given. (Maathai 2007b, 23)

Yet, the nuns who were her teachers, in spite of the context that led them to be her teachers, also explicitly taught about respect for all people. Maathai does not discuss how she made sense of this seeming paradox: growing up in an egalitarian culture within a non-egalitarian society, yet she credits both family and school with helping form her belief that all people should be respected and treated equally. This was especially true of the teachers she had in college in the United States during the early 1960s.

This was a time of great transformation and struggle for human rights and social change in the United States. The Civil Rights Movement was growing, and the sexual revolution and women’s movement were underway as well. It was a powerful time to be a young person in America, and when asked about transformative moments in her life, Maathai speaks of the ways this experience influenced her. In particular, the Civil Rights Movement transformed Maathai’s understandings and perspectives on race. The Civil Rights Movement, along with the Mau Mau Movement in Kenya, employed adult education as a vehicle to achieve their primary goals of liberation and race consciousness.
The Mau Mau struggle for justice in Kenya had led me to believe that education was part of the solution to many of the problems black people were facing everywhere. (Maathai 2007, 85)

Maathai’s memory of her first experience of discrimination in the United States was a time when she and other students stopped to get drinks at a bus stop somewhere in the South. She was surprised by the discrimination both in terms of facilities and how they were treated, and it stood alone in her memory for a long time as an isolated experience. Although other students experienced some discrimination, she does not recall having racialized experiences herself during her early years at school in Kansas. Mount St. Scholastica was a predominately White college, but some of the African American staff took Maathai and fellow African student Agatha under their wing. Maathai recalls that at school, she and the other African students were warmly welcomed, and the nuns served as kind mentors, saying they were “proud and happy to have students from Africa” (Maathai 2007b, 80). Over the course of her time there she observed personal freedoms not noticed in Catholic schools back home, and found this “incredibly liberating” (Maathai 2007b, 81). She describes her time at the “Mount” (the nickname for her college) as one “full of fondness, like a family” where they watched racial strife on TV but did not experience it.

I took an interest in the Civil Rights Movement and learned a lot. I wanted to understand it, and America in all its intricacy, and to see where I as a Kenyan and a black woman fit in. I often wondered why I should come to America to see black people being treated as harshly as I had witnessed in Kenya as the British attempted to crush the Mau Mau Movement. (86)

During her time at the Mount, Maathai’s understandings of racism matured and expanded. She had her experience of colonial racism in Africa to compare with what she saw in the United States. She noted the ways African peoples, both in America and Kenya, responded to racism, and the similarities and differences in the discourse.
At that time, Atchison was segregated. As the women took us around their neighborhood and the more affluent part of town, they pointed out to us the inequities in American society. The economic differences between the neighborhoods were stark but not surprising to us, because the same divide was evident in Kenya. We blamed our inequities on colonialism, while Americans blamed theirs on the legacy of slavery. (Maathai 2007b, 87)

During the summers in Atchison, Maathai worked as a lab technician. It was through a colleague at the lab that she was introduced to the Nation of Islam. These teachings contradicted many of the previous teachings that had informed her values and beliefs, and this created a disorienting dilemma. Transformative Learning Theorists describe a disorienting dilemma as an experience of having one’s meaning perspectives significantly changed, either through a major personal event or series of events (Mezirow 2000). Maathai wrestled to make sense of the contradiction between her existing worldview and that which she was being introduced to, but not after trying to educate the followers of the Nation how they were wrong.

The next day I reported to work, eager to tell my boss what had happened at the meeting and how I had informed the followers of the Nation of Islam that what they were saying was not true. “How are you so sure?” the technician asked, with a sly smile. “I just know,” I told him, emphatically. “You mean,” he replied, “you’ve been taught so. Why do you think that everything you’ve been taught it true?” (Maathai 2007b, 89)

Reflecting on that conversation, Maathai observes her own naiveté at the time. She was a product of mis-education and psychological colonization.

In hindsight I can see that my boss that summer in the lab must have wondered how I could have grown up in colonial Africa and yet have had no idea about the struggles of African Americans, the African Diaspora, or any knowledge of history or religion beyond what my Catholic education had taught me. (90)

Years of colonial education on the subject of America had somehow kept the African American part hidden from us. Even though we studied the slave trade, the subject was taught in a way that did not leave us appreciating its inhumanity. An African has to go to America to understand slavery and its impact on black people—not only in Africa but also in the Diaspora. (Maathai 2007b, 78)
Another social movement of the time that influenced Maathai’s perspectives and commitments was the sexual revolution and women’s movement. She was at an all-women’s college and immersed in a culture of strong and committed women.

The United States prepared me to be confident not only in reclaiming my original names but to critique what was happening at home, including what women were experiencing. My years in the United States overlapped with the beginnings of the women’s movement and even though many women were still bound to traditional ideas about themselves at that time, I came to see that as an African woman I was perhaps even more constrained in what I could do or think, or even hope for. (Maathai 2007b, 96)

One of the adult tasks Maathai was learning during this time was to critically examine and question truth claims she had accepted until that point in her life: “My four years at the Mount, and the experiences I had both on and off the campus, nurtured in me a willingness to listen and learn, to think critically and analytically, and to ask questions” (92). This exploration took her into different domains and aspects of her identity. In addition to race and gender, she also began to examine her beliefs about religion, especially the ways in which the dominant beliefs and structures were oppressive.

When I arrived in Atchison I was a very strict and dogmatic Catholic. This was the time leading up to the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) and support for reforms in the Catholic Church was growing. At the Mount, I began to look at religion differently and to examine the issues confronting people of faith; not to the extent of losing it entirely, as happened to some, but wondering why behavior we had been told was wrong was now deemed acceptable by church authorities. (81)

Big changes were happening, both in America and in the world. In 1963 she, along with other Kenyans, celebrated Kenya’s independence. Also that year she grieved John F. Kennedy’s assassination. Kennedy had been an important model to her, not just for the facilitation of her education through the Airlift, but also for his vision of a global society rooted in truth, justice,
and intellectual exchange. When she returned to Kenya in 1966, she had high expectations for her newly independent country and her potential role in it.

America . . . had a way of talking to young people. There was freedom of thought, expression and movement, and a chance to be able to participate in debates about human rights and discrimination. So when I came back to Kenya, I had a tendency to express myself. I felt I needed freedom to move, to speak, to associate with whom I wanted and that these freedoms should be given and that I shouldn’t have to fight for them. (Richards 2007, 89–91)

It is fair to say that America transformed me: It made me into the person I am today. It taught me not to waste any opportunity and to do what can be done—and that there is a lot to do. The spirit of freedom and possibility that America nurtured in me made me want to foster the same in Kenya, and it was in this spirit that I returned home. (Maathai 2007b, 97)

In particular Maathai returned to Kenya with new ideas and beliefs regarding equality. She did not consider herself vulnerable to discrimination until she started to experience it based on gender. At that time, only men could receive the university’s full benefits, and it was assumed that married women were supported and housed by men.

What I did not enjoy at the university was the discrimination I and my fellow female colleagues faced . . . Vert and I waged this first fight for equality together. Many of the benefits given to male professional staff at the university were legacies of the colonial era, when young male teachers from Britain were encouraged to work in Kenya and other colonies and were provided with incentives in addition to their salaries . . . When Kenya became independent, we took over most of these systems completely intact. (Maathai 2007b, 114–115)

Her activism on behalf of equal pay for women faculty posed a challenge to those in power, because it sought to dismantle a system of privilege that had existed for a long time.

I argued with the university that this was completely unacceptable and that terms of service must be equal. Professional women, I said, could not be discriminated against just because during colonial times no women professionals came to work in the colonies. This seemed a completely reasonable proposition. It never occurred to me that Vert and I would have to fight this battle. That I or other women should be paid less than our male colleagues of equal standing was very irritating to us. (115)
They turned to the staff association for assistance in this battle, but the association was not able to negotiate with university authorities. As a strategy, Maathai and her colleague Vert tried to turn the association into a union but were unsuccessful because the chancellor of the university was also president of country. It was an example of the ways that educational systems were corrupted to serve the interests of those in power.

Eventually the women’s requests were granted in order to disperse the negative attention the university was beginning to receive. Maathai and other leaders in the effort continued to encourage women to stand up for their rights. Many women were advised not to join the struggle and those leading it, especially Maathai, became a scapegoat.

Not surprisingly those with power considered her a liability and a threat. She was eventually released from her faculty position at the University of Nairobi for reasons that had nothing to do with the quality of her work there. This experience was both devastating and illuminating for her. In the end it deepened her understanding of sexism and deepened her resolve to work against it.

This experience was an eye-opener for me. I had never anticipated that I would be discriminated against on the basis of my gender as often as I was, or that I could be belittled even while making a substantial contribution to society. I did not want to accept that one human being would deliberately seek to limit another, and I found myself challenging the idea that a woman could not be as good as or better than a man. What the struggle for equality at the university also taught me was that sometimes you have to hold on to what you believe in because not everybody wishes you well or will give you what you deserve—not even your fellow women. (Maathai 2007b, 117)

Perhaps it was this experience that formed or strengthened her resolve to work on behalf of gender equality as well as self-ethnic liberation. Shortly after Kenyan independence, Maathai became involved in a variety of activities related to the creation of the new state. One of these activities involved organizing women. The National
Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK), which evolved as an Africentric organization out of a colonial organization, played a key role in addressing women’s issues in independent Kenya. It was through the NCWK that Maathai was able to network with other women who shared her commitments to equality and justice.

To understand the need to create it (NCWK) in 1964 it is important to keep in mind that, prior to Kenya’s independence, women’s organizations—like all other institutions—operated along segregated racial and professional lines in a form of mild apartheid. At independence, these political vestiges of a divided society had to be abandoned. (Maathai 2006, 30)

Justice

A natural extension of her commitment to equality was to justice. This involved understanding root causes of inequality, such as racism, sexism, and corruption of power, as well as a perspective on what was right. Maathai’s approach to pursuing justice followed an African way of knowing justice and therefore focused on right relationship rather than punishment and restitution.

Maathai demonstrated her Righteous Commitment to justice most visibly in her enduring challenge to the Moi administration and the way it ignored those without privilege:

I hoped he would stand for the weak, for the poor, for the lonely, for the fearful, for the ignorant, and for the silent. We must not stand for the powerful only, or the rich only, or for the arrogant only. Justice does not demand that. (Maathai 2007b, 188)

She challenged the way the Moi administration tried to manipulate the public through coercion, harassment, and ignoring direct inquiries about corrupt practices. Strategically, she used the media to expose these acts of domination and to get her messages out to the public. She wrote to Moi directly, explaining to him about the millions of Kenyans who wondered what happened to “moral justice, to fair play, and to responsibility, those who are supposed to protect them, to
guide them and to lead them to a brighter tomorrow” (188). In short, she called out Moi and demanded accountability to the citizens of Kenya. Once this happened, the government ramped up its efforts to silence her. Prior to this, she and the Movement had been considered relatively benign, just some women planting trees.

As long as the Green Belt Movement was perceived as a few women raising seedlings, we didn’t matter to the government. But as soon as we began to explain how trees disappear and why it is important for citizens to stand up for their rights—whether environmental, women’s or human—senior officials in government and members of Parliament began to take notice . . . This unsettled the authorities, and they began to come up with reasons to curtail our activities. They invoked an old colonial law that made it illegal for more than nine people to meet in one place without first obtaining a government license. (180)

As she notes in the film Taking Root, “At first government did not bother the women, but when they [Moi] realized they were organizing, they started to interfere” (Merton and Dater 2008). The government clamped down on dissent by using heavy-handed tactics such as arrests and murder to consolidate its power.

Maathai was perceived as such a threat to the administration that they actually used an emergency procedure to interrupt a Parliamentary session to talk about her. It was revealed that this session also became personal, with some politicians making slanderous remarks about her. This strengthened her resolve to challenge this unethical and corrupt administration, on reflection stating: “I wasn’t going to take those slanders lying down” (Merton and Dater 2008).

The human rights protest Maathai is best known for was on behalf of freeing political prisoners. In 1991, Oginga Odinga formed the political party: Forum for the Restoration of Democracy (FORD). In spite of brutality at a pro-democracy rally in Kamukunji Park, Moi was eventually forced to accept multiparty elections. During a FORD meeting in January of 1992, they learned that Moi wanted to hand over the government to the army and that they had named Maathai, among others, as a target for assassination. The media was alerted, but those running
the story were arrested. The police came for Maathai, and she was charged with multiple offenses including treason, which carried the death penalty. In jail, she experienced intense pain. There was an international response to her imprisonment including statements from Al Gore, Robert Kennedy, Paul Wellstone, and at least six other U.S. senators. The international pressure caused Moi to withdraw the charges but he did not release all the prisoners.

In response, Maathai helped organize a mothers group to advocate for release of their sons, political prisoners who had spoken out for democracy. The women met with the Attorney General and asked that their sons be released. Nothing happened. They decided to protest with a hunger strike in Uruhu Park. They set up and waited in an area that became known as Freedom Corner, but no sons came. Others joined them, some in solidarity and other political prisoners who came to tell their stories of torture. The group grew to several hundred people. On the third day police came with tear gas and batons. Maathai was knocked unconscious.

The mothers in the tent refused to be intimidated and they did not run. Instead, they did something very brave: Several of them stripped, some of them completely naked, and showed the police officers their breasts. (I myself did not strip). One of the most powerful of African traditions concerns the relationship between a woman and a man who could be her son. Every woman old enough to be your mother is considered like your own mother and expects to be treated with considerable respect. As they bared their breasts, what the mothers were saying to the policemen in their anger and frustration as they were being beaten was “By showing you my nakedness, I curse you as I would my son for the way you are abusing me.” (Maathai 2007b, 221)

When Maathai recovered, she called a press conference.

I was told that the police claimed I had incited them to beat me unconscious and that I had asked to be given a black eye and a baseball-sized lump on my head. I informed the press although after what had happened to me I would have to stay away from “dangerous ground,” I wouldn’t be silenced or deterred from telling the truth and I wouldn’t go away. “The mothers,” I emphasized, “had a right to seek the freedom of their sons.” (221)
The protestors took shelter in the All Saints Cathedral and continued their protest, never expecting the vigil and hunger strike would last for a year. Maathai joined them stating, “There was never any question in my mind of not seeing the vigil through. Having joined the women, I would not abandon their cause” (Maathai 2007b, 226). The women took turns so at any given time some were able to recuperate from the harsh conditions. During the vigil Maathai tried to maintain international relationships.

Over the course of that year, the mothers’ nonviolent protest became a focus, in Kenya and in other countries, for those wanting to end state-sponsored torture, random imprisonment, and the unjust suppression of the rights and voices of the people. (225)

Her role as a leader of this effort was essential for the women, both in term of her capacity and also in terms of her international connections.

The mothers trusted me. Not only could I speak English and translate for them, I was the leader who could articulate the connections and show how the struggle for the sons’ freedom fit into the bigger picture of the pro-democracy struggle. (225)

The sons were released in 1993. On reflection Maathai says, “When I think of what happened, I believe that it was the stories of torture that made the government decide that what we were doing was dangerous” (222).

Service

Another component of Maathai’s Righteous Leadership has been her Righteous Commitment to serving the common good, risking her own life on behalf of democratic principles. In reflecting on her role as an activist and the sacrifices she has made on behalf of her commitments, she credits her family and teachers as central to her commitment to the common good:
Now, many years down the road and with a lot of experience, I realize that the approach that I had, and still have, toward public service is one shared by a minority of people . . . I assumed that all people working in public service loved the people they served, were accountable and transparent, and had integrity. That was part of the culture that had been inculcated in me by my parents and teachers. It was part of my personality, character and conscience. (Maathai 2006, 11)

In keeping with her African worldview, the common good is understood in a way that spans time and thus includes both ancestors and future generations. Thus when engaging in acts on behalf of the common good, her approach is to honor and to preserve what was left by the ancestors as well as work to ensure a just, harmonious, and sustainable future. She says, “We are planting trees for our country, a legacy for our children as our ancestors left a legacy for us” (Merton and Dater 2008).

Righteous Leadership

Righteous Leadership is the application of Righteous Commitment. Scipio Colin notes the connection in this way:

And one of the elements is that however one defines leadership, it can be in articulating for a cause, a group, a movement, a person, are you running with me? It’s not always quantitative as much as it is qualitative, but one’s suggestions, one’s decisions are not based upon how it benefits you . . . it is not about you. That if you never receive the benefit then so be it, because it wasn’t about you in the first place. You know, it answers the question, whom do you serve?

What qualities make a Righteous Leader? Certainly, courage to stand for ideals and speak truth to power is an essential quality. Leadership, after all, involves sharing a vision and working to actualize that vision in a way that inspires and galvanizes people. Some say the ultimate judgment of a leader rests in his or her capacity to enact change. This requires the capacity to follow one’s ideals and conscience. Perseverance is also needed to maintain the vision and endure hardships that come with challenging the status quo. Lastly, belief is the quality that
allows a Righteous Leader to maintain faith in a vision and a sense of purpose related to the actualization of that vision. Wangari Maathai states,

"But I started looking at things differently, seeing the big picture and the link between some of the problems I and the community were experiencing and what was happening to the environment, especially with respect to the availability of clean drinking water and food, and the whole issue of poverty and human rights. The more I engaged, the deeper I got and found myself unable to stop. In many ways I was helped by the fact that I was not just articulating issues but was able to put them into action. (Richards 2007, 2)"

Drawing on her sense of responsibility to use her education to better the lives of her community, she assumed leadership for the change she was trying to create.

Courage

At times it is difficult to attribute certain perspectives to particular events, but Maathai credits her divorce with providing her the capacity to follow her own ideals and conscience (Maathai 2007b, 139–155). Although the divorce was a devastating event, it fostered an inner strength and sense of personal empowerment that she could tap into later on. The divorce itself was difficult since it resulted in the breakup of her family, and it was also exposed to public scrutiny.

Western-style divorce, like many other practices that were legacies of Kenya’s colonial heritage, presented a contradiction in our lives. The legal process of divorce was foreign to our society and uprooted us into an alien sphere. It forced us into a modality of working through the courts while the community outside had very different norms surrounding marriage and family structures. We had to deal with both of these worlds. (145)

She was ostracized and ridiculed, with the details of the divorce made public by those working to discredit her. Yet she endured these with her head high, and her commitments intact. If anything the trauma strengthened her inner resolve and sense of self. “I had been publicly humiliated during my divorce and denied reemployment at the University of Nairobi because I had dared to
challenge the ruling party. Indeed, it was almost the price I had to pay to be free” (93). She was charged with contempt of court for speaking out in an interview on the unfair nature of the divorce trial and sentenced to jail for six months. The women in the jail very kind to her and she was released after only three days.

As it was, there was very little sympathy for me in the press: The reporters and editors, like many others, assumed that if a marriage fails it is the woman who is not doing her job properly and obeying her husband. As far as they were concerned I deserved to be whipped publicly for challenging the authority of my husband. And since I was an educated woman, being publicly humiliated would also serve to warn other such educated women that if they also dared to challenge such authority, the same fate would befall them. (146)

Mwangi and the trial had taken all her money. The reason Mwangi gave as grounds for the divorce was that she was “too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control” (Maathai 2007b, 146). In perhaps one of the most difficult acts of her life, she took her children to him and left for a job in Zambia. In spite of the ugliness of the divorce, she knew Mwangi would take care of the children and she was not in a position to do so herself. This was a very difficult time in her life and one she reflects on with renewed pain. She chose this course because she believed it was in the best interest of the children to have a stable and secure home, which she knew she would not be able to provide. These personal experiences of empowerment and growth may have informed some of the key messages she integrated into the Movement’s adult education programming related to women’s empowerment: messages like “we must stand up for what we believe in, and we cannot be intimidated” (Merton and Dater 2008).

There are countless stories of Maathai’s acts of courage in her various fights for justice. In virtually all of these, she speaks truth to power. One dramatic example was the protest at Karura Forest. In 1998 she learned of the government’s plan to sell Karura Forest, which was public, for private development. Karura was a major water and wind catchment area and home to
many rare species. She wrote letters to the Moi administration inquiring about the rumored
development and illegal logging, but after receiving no response she began a campaign to stop it.
She used letters, held press conferences, and spoke out publicly. She and others who had
organized around this issue, engaged in different forms of protest:

> But we returned several more times and even established a tree nursery inside the
> forest. These visits became like teach-ins or the seminars we held with Green Belt
groups. We would talk to the workers and explain the role the forest played in
Nairobi’s environment and inform them that Karura was being cut down so that
wealthy people could live there and that they and their families wouldn’t benefit
at all. (Maathai 2007b, 263)

Strategically, they always invited the media so that their message got out to the public, and this
began to shift public opinion. Soon people everywhere were aware of their rights to public land
and were speaking out against the destruction of these forests. As well, people were organizing
and were communicating with each other about the protests.

> Whenever a piece of public land was threatened with privatization, the Green Belt
> Movement erected a billboard painted in the colors of the Kenyan flag to alert the
> public of the threat so that members could protect the land from being “grabbed.”
> (261)

In spite of the potential danger, more people engaged in protest, focusing on nonviolent
approaches.

> This is not to say were reckless. We found ways to protect ourselves. When we
> were confronted with a tense situation, we would sing about the need to protect
> the forest, and dance. This was a way to disarm the armed men in front of us—
> and it worked. We could see their frowns and scowls soften. We were only
> women singing and dancing, after all, and those things didn’t pose a threat. As far
> as they were concerned, we could sing and dance all day! What they didn’t know
> is that the singing and dancing made us feel strong. It also ensured that nobody
> got hurt. (272)

> Although the Movement had started a tree nursery in Karura, they were prevented from
taking care of it by security guards that had been installed. One day upon arrival Maathai was
told that if she dared to plant a tree she would be killed. She responded, “I can’t leave this place
today until I plant a tree” (Merton and Dater 2008). She and the others were badly attacked with clubs, whips, and stones, and she was beaten unconscious and taken to jail.

By then, I realized I had a deep gash on the top of my head and blood was streaming down my neck. I was furious, not so much with the thugs as with the police. My head still warm with the blood, I reported the assault and told the officers that we knew who the attackers were. We offered to take them back to the scene of the violence so they could arrest our assailants. If you can believe it, the police did not move at all. Instead, they asked me to sign a formal complaint testifying to my assault. So, sign it I did: I took my finger and dipped it into the blood pouring from my head and wrote a red “X” on that paper—so they would know how I felt about what had happened and also be unable to avoid the evidence in front of them. (Maathai 2007b, 269)

There was a massive public outcry. A newsman had covered the assault showing the police in cahoots with the thugs. Kofi Annan and foreign leaders spoke out, as well as clergy. Students organized an independent protest, ramming down the gate at Karura. Eventually the developers and thugs moved out, although illegal logging in the public forest continued until the new government was elected in 2002. With the new government came a partnership with the Movement to restore Karura Forest. The Movement considered it a victory, not just because the logging stopped but also because “in the end, what was important was that we showed we were not intimidated. We were in the right and had stood up for what we believed in” (Maathai 2007b, 273).

For me, the destruction of Karura Forest, like the malnourished women in the 1970s, the Times complex in Uhuru Park, and the political prisoners detained without trial, were problems that needed to be solved, and the authorities were stopping me from finding a solution. (272)

Through her own living, this courage is a quality that she inspired in others. Indeed, her significance as a great teacher and leader is marked by this capacity to empower others. In the film Taking Root, a member of the Green Belt Movement shares the profound impact Maathai has had on her: “Wangari has given me the strength to
know if I fight for something, I can make it happen. Two options: I do it or I die.” An environmental and human rights activist, who was active in the same fights, credits Maathai for the collective transformation she fostered: “Because that was the turning point in this country, that no matter who you are, how small, you can make a difference” (Merton and Dater 2008).

Perseverance

Maathai’s victories often took many years and much struggle. It was her perseverance and steadfast focus on a desired outcome that contributed to many of these victories. Her ability to persevere is rooted in her belief that “when you know the truth and you stick by it, things change” (Merton and Dater 2008).

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. (Maathai 2007b, 164)

Trees have real and symbolic significance to Maathai, and at times she uses them to exemplify characteristics she values. For example, in her autobiography she speaks of the trees planted in Uruhu Park in memory of those people killed during the massacre. The government tried to destroy those trees, but they survived. “These trees, like Saba Saba, inspired me; they showed me that, no matter how much you try to destroy it, you can’t stop the truth and justice from sprouting” (207). In part she was able to persevere because she was open to different ideas and strategies. She often did not see one path to achieve a goal, but rather approached her work from a perspective of learning.

What also helped me during this time was an approach I developed through my work with the Green Belt Movement. “Look” I would say to the people working with me, “we are on a track that has not been explored before. We are on a trial-and-error basis. If what we did yesterday did not produce good results, let’s not repeat it today because it’s a waste of time.” . . . I had that attitude: If you have
given something your best shot and it is still not working, then what else can you do? (144)

This capacity to adapt to changing conditions, to draw on resources or the context at hand broadened her range of options and allowed her to build support by including others’ ideas and perspectives in forging new ground.

Belief

The quality of a leader’s character can be judged by the way she stands by her beliefs. In many regards, Maathai’s belief system was rooted in a commitment to justice, and this commitment provided the purpose (Nia) for many of the activities she engaged in.

Each person needs to raise their consciousness to a certain level so that they will not give up or succumb. If your consciousness is at such a level, you are willing to do what you believe is the right thing—popular opinion notwithstanding. We do the right thing not to please people but because it’s the only logically reasonable thing to do, as long as we are being honest with ourselves—even if we are the only ones. I felt this statement was so important that I included it in one of the first pamphlets I wrote about the Green Belt Movement. (Maathai 2007b, 165)

Faith (Imani) also played a central role in the formation and expression of Maathai’s beliefs.

While I was going through the divorce and feeling under a lot of pressure, I embraced a philosophy that has given me strength in difficult times ever since. Every experience has a lesson. Every situation has a silver lining. Many people assume that I must have been inordinately brave to face down the thugs and police during the campaign for Karura Forest. The truth is simply that I did not understand why anyone would want to violate the rights of others or to ruin the environment. Why would someone destroy the only forest left in the city and give it to friends and political supporters to build expensive houses and golf courses! (272)

One struggle for which Maathai is best known was rooted in her belief that public green spaces should be available to all people. This struggle began in 1989 when she learned that Daniel Arap Moi, then president of Kenya, wanted to build a large skyscraper and statue of
himself in Uruhu Park. Uruhu was the only public park in Nairobi on the scale of Hyde Park or Central Park. The project, called the Times Media Trust Complex, included a 60-story tower and would house; the headquarters for Kenya Africa National Union (KANU), the ruling party in Kenya from 1963 to 2002, the *Kenya Times* newspaper (an organ of the ruling party), a trading center, offices, an auditorium, galleries, shopping malls, and parking space for two thousand cars (Maathai 2007b, 185–186).

Initially Maathai began sending letters inquiring about the rumored project, but was ignored. She was careful in her actions since “at this time whoever openly questioned the government’s actions was arrested and detained” (Maathai 2007b, 184). She sent more letters to the government, and eventually to the shareholders of the project. She received no response. She then wrote to the resident United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) representative in Nairobi.

I complained that the owners of the *Kenya Times* and international investors were taking advantage of the Kenyan people, who were so busy trying to meet their basic needs that they “did not have time to complain, restrain, demonstrate and challenge the un-admirable locals who have collaborated [on the project] and the irresponsible financiers who have persuaded them to.” I felt strongly that the issue extended beyond the preservation of the park to a matter of the government being responsible and accountable to its citizens. (188)

There was retaliation. Moi spoke out suggesting that she should be a proper African woman by respecting men and being quiet. Other women’s groups denounced her. Moi declared that all foreign assistance for women must go through the government. Members of Parliament called for the Green Belt Movement to be banned. Maathai endured general harassment and abuse.

I knew that the government was using me as a mirror in which other women would look at themselves. They were being asked to decide if that image was who they would like to be. Because I couldn’t go into the women’s hearts and tell them, “It’s all right. I haven’t done anything wrong. It’s them, not me.” It was
okay for me to be called crazy and told I had insects in my head: That is the way people using their own mirror saw me. But I offered women a different mirror—my own. What is important, indeed necessary, is to hold up your own mirror to see yourself as you really are. (Maathai 2007b, 197)

The government forced the GBM out of its building. They were blacklisted and could not find a space to rent, so Maathai moved GBM headquarters into her house, where they remained for seven years. International supporters eventually came up with funds to buy a house for offices, and CARE Austria bought a building for GBM to use as a training center at Lang’ata. The fight against the Times Complex in Uruhu Park continued. International allies sent letters and put pressure on donor agencies not to support dictators or to invest in their regimes. Many letter writers tied the fight for the park to the issue of democracy in Kenya and the government’s reluctance to heed the people’s wishes (194). This pressure resulted in the announcement of a scaled down project 1990, and in 1992 the project was declared dead.

Indeed the slaying of the “park monster” as we called it energized the Kenyan people. From that time on, we moved with more confidence, courage and speed. To me, this was the beginning of the end of Kenya as a one-party state. Still, while we had won a victory, the struggle to restore our democracy would last another decade. (205)

The victory over Uruhu Park mobilized citizens to engage in civic action. It was this victory that led indirectly to multiparty elections.

This was the heart of the issue. Even though the immediate struggle was over the park and the right of everyone to enjoy green space, the effort was also about getting Kenyans to raise their voices. I was distressed at the audacity with which the government was violating people’s rights; quashing dissent—often brutally . . . Ordinary people had become so fearful that they had been rendered nearly powerless. Now, they were beginning to reclaim their power. (Maathai 2007b, 195)

Following Uruhu, there was an organized citizenry that understood experientially the power of collective action. This experience laid a foundation for future efforts related to democracy and environmental change. When considering how the Green Belt Movement stopped the Times
complex in Uruhu Park, Maathai noted: “It was at that point that people felt [when project died] that if one little woman . . . can stop that building, surely this government can be changed” (Merton and Dater 2008).

Reflective Practice

Like many great leaders, Maathai did not set out to lead a movement. Her work started with an idea and a commitment to make a difference in the lives of people. She learned on the job by reflecting on her experiences and trying different strategies: “I asked myself constantly whether something could be done differently or better” (Maathai 2007b, 171). She conducted periodic assessments of the educational programs run by the Green Belt Movement. In particular, she examined areas where she was not as successful as she had hoped at engaging local people, and came to more deeply understand how shared leadership was the key to success: “I learned that if you do not have local people who are committed to the process and willing to work with their communities, the projects will not survive” (132).

In 2003 Maathai wrote a book on the history of the Green Belt Movement so that others could learn from and about the Movement. Chapter 8 of her book focuses on lessons learned through a critical analysis of their work. What follows is a summary of some key points that emerged from this reflection.

There is need for good leadership

In postcolonial Africa, many communities experienced corruption and deceit in government because many of the postcolonial governments adopted the same exploitive and corrupt structures that existed under colonial rule. The current population grew up under that system and had come to expect corrupt governance.
It is a fact that the greatest damage done to Africa has been done by the highly educated African elite, who are exposed to modern lifestyles and values and who have not adopted a culture of honesty and accountability. (Maathai 2006, 83)

Work patiently to motivate communities

Carter G. Woodson (2000) describes the ways in which African people, and those of the Diaspora, were stripped of their cultural center through education. He offers a model for re-education, rooted in the re-centering of African history and culture. The process of re-education following mis-education does not happen overnight, and a liberatory agenda takes time. While Maathai does not cite Woodson’s work, she articulates an understanding of these concepts of mis-education and re-education. A critical component of adult education in the Green Belt Movement involves teaching about the process of mis-education and then re-centering African knowledge through re-education. These commitments can be seen in all adult education activities of the GBM.

Reach both decision makers and communities at the same time

Many decision makers are the elite and often only pay lip service to conservation because “they are usually involved, directly or indirectly, in the plundering of resources” (Maathai 2006, 84). It is important to work directly with this population, while at the same time working directly with communities. Since rural communities are often more supportive if their decision makers are, it is strategic to be sharing information with both parties at the same time since they are likely to be influenced by, or take an interest in the actions of the other.

In addition to these key insights, Maathai also notes the significance of field staff being keen observers of the people and communities they work with; the necessity of commitment to community development since it is a slow process; the need to prioritize resource distribution; and the need for democratic administration and leadership.
Chapter Summary

Maathai’s Righteous Commitments to equality, justice, and the common good informed her leadership of environmental and social change. She enacted these commitments through an ethic of care and personal sacrifice. This ethic of care is visible in the respect she accorded not just her colleagues but also her foes, in the centering of marginalized people, and in her recognition of and openness to the humanity of all. As a leader she maintained a vision without becoming entrenched in an ideology. This is significant to her success at mobilizing thousands of people to work toward that vision and to share it. Though her beliefs and values were strong, she did not impose them on people or exclude them based on differences. Rather she connected with people through shared human values, values that go beyond ideology.

As a leader, and before that as a community activist and educator, Maathai demonstrated courage in forging new ground and in speaking truth to power. She demonstrated perseverance, commenting once that for thirty years she did not think anyone really noticed much of what she was doing (Merton and Dater 2008). She did not set out to start a movement or an organization, but rather wanted to use her education and capacity to respond to problems faced by rural women in Kenya. She recognized “that to be successful, an organization and the person heading it had to have plans and carry them out; they could not just talk” (Maathai 2007b, 166), and so she took the responsibility upon herself.

Now many years after the start of that first tree-planting campaign, she is recognized worldwide as one of our great visionaries and leaders. Her approach, using culturally grounded adult education at the grassroots while simultaneously challenging oppressive systems, offers a model of Righteous Leadership for social and environmental change.
The purpose of this research was to introduce Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement to the field of adult education, with a special focus on her philosophy, her leadership, and the influence of those on adult education. As noted in the first chapter, scholarship about Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement is absent in the literature of the field. Historically the field has marginalized those very voices, histories, and knowledge bases that provide models for how to live justly and sustainably on the planet. Therefore, it is important to add to a growing body of literature that reflects the sociocultural, historical, and intellectual contributions of Africans and members of the African Diaspora.
This study offers a portrait of Maathai’s life and work on its own terms, specifically as it relates to the practice of adult education. It lays a foundation for future research that could expand, critique, or compare this work. A key message of Maathai’s is that equitable and sustainable management of natural resources is inextricably linked to its human dimensions and to the just and democratic treatment of people. To heed this call, we must find ways to address these connections in both our practice and our scholarship. This means that we should not teach about democracy without teaching about place, and we should not teach about place without teaching about history. As wars rage over oil and land, and as we begin to see the dramatic effects of climate change, we do not have time to ignore the relationship between humans and nature. All our work as educators must consider these relationships.

Maathai’s message is not just about what we teach but also about how we teach it. To teach in ways that are just means that we must design programs that are grounded in people’s experience and culture, their history, and the places they inhabit. In particular, when we are designing educational programs or community development activities with people who have been colonized, we must focus on re-education or else risk perpetuating sociocultural and intellectual racism. We can use education to re-center, de-colonize, empower, liberate, and create change.

Key Messages

Maathai describes the Green Belt Movement as “a national, indigenous and grassroots organization, whose activities are implemented mostly by women. Its mandate is environmental and the main activity is to plant trees and prioritize the felt needs of communities” (Maathai 1995). This description exemplifies and embodies the philosophy of the liberatory adult educator.
who created the movement that led to the organization, Maathai herself. The Green Belt Movement addresses the needs and issues of rural people and the urban poor by focusing efforts on reforestation, economic development, nutrition and health, and women’s empowerment. Adult education is central to all of these efforts. In addition to these specific areas of learning, the Movement fosters participatory democracy and liberation through a larger, integrated mission.

The organization tries to empower women in particular and the civil society in general so that individuals can take action and break the vicious circle of poverty and underdevelopment. The Movement approaches development from the bottom and moves upwards to reach those who plan and execute the large-scale development models whose benefits hardly ever trickle down to the poor. The Movement has no blue print, preferring to rely on a trial and error approach, which adopts what works and quickly drops what does not. It calls upon the creative energies of the ordinary local women, on their expertise, knowledge and capabilities. (Maathai 1995)

The Movement’s approach to education is to address both the symptoms and causes of issues identified at the community level, and to teach community members to recognize and understand how these are related. Using seminars, workshops, and other forms of social exchange, the Movement educates citizens about the linkages between economic and political issues and the environment.

It encourages participants to develop expertise in their work and not be limited by their illiteracy or low level of formal education. It also addresses the role of the civil society in protecting the environment, developing a democratic culture, pursuing participatory development, promoting accountable and responsible governance, which puts its people first, protecting human rights and encouraging respect for the rule of law. (Maathai 1995)

In essence, the messages and insights gleaned from the experience of Maathai and the Green Belt Movement offer a framework for the liberation of Africa from environmental and social exploitation. What follows are some of these key messages. Many were outlined in Maathai’s
speech “Bottlenecks to Development in Africa” (1995), which is as relevant today as it was then.

*Peace Depends on Just Management of Natural Resources*

In the years following colonialism, neocolonial dictators ruled many of the newly independent African countries. These leaders gained and maintained power through oppressive policy and corrupt practice. Human rights were violated in their pursuit of political and economic power. Due to civil wars in many African countries, the human rights violations perpetrated by other oppressive regimes were ignored. Other nations found it convenient to portray these oppressive governments as progressive, even while they were systematically silencing their critics through illegal imprisonment and torture. During the Cold War, millions of African lives were sacrificed in state-sponsored wars as superpowers fought for economic and political control, especially of resources. These corrupt and dictatorial leaders were complicit in the massacres of their own people. Today, many African countries, including Kenya, continue to deal with the legacy of these leaders. Education about the linkages between peace, prosperity, and participatory democracy is essential in liberating people from these oppressive regimes.

*Africentric Leadership*

The neocolonial or post-independence leaders in Kenya, as in many other African countries, are responsible for much of the environmental destruction, poverty, underdevelopment, and disease and mortality that exist today.

During the past three decades, Africa suffered lack of visionary and altruistic leaders committed to the welfare of their own people. They were persuaded to accept the development model of the West, borrow capital from the West and be guided by experts from the same west. This was partly possible because the colonial administration deliberately destroyed and discredited the traditional forms of self-governance in Africa. Until late 1950s when the inevitable wave of de-colonization swept across Africa natives were not allowed to practice their own form of governance, culture, religion, traditions and customs. While the
In the transition to independence, many colonial administrations promoted young Africans whom they deemed to be sympathetic to their interests, into political positions where they would be poised to take over. These young Africans became “corroborators for neo-colonialism” (Maathai 1995). Many of these new leaders, recipients of both wealth and power, became the new elite in early post-independence years. In order to maintain that status, especially in relation to the Global North, they continued the exploitive agenda of the colonial administrations. In most cases, this involved extensive exploitation of natural resources and people.

The ruling African elite is a new class of people in Africa, hugely privileged, enjoying the fruits of economic growth and innovations and, deliberately supporting and helping to perpetuate the unjust and exploitative economic worldwide phenomenon: a socio-economic and political system which favours a majority of countries and individuals in the Northern Hemisphere and their small counterparts in the South, but marginalizes and excludes a small number of people in the North and large numbers in the poor regions of the South. (Maathai 1995)

In response, citizens began to dissent, seeking a better quality of life. In some places, such as Kenya, grassroots leadership emerged that centered African, not Euro-American, interests. These leaders challenged the practice of dictators who claimed absolute power and control of all natural resources and mechanisms of governance, including the media. These leaders fostered harmonious relations between Africans and sought to dismantle the divisions created by the non-Africentric, African dictators. Part of this effort involves educating citizens about the ways in which these arbitrarily created divisions served Euro-American interests.

But nationally (and even internationally), national mass media present such conflicts in Africa as ancient tribal animosities between African tribes coming to the fore at this time of political liberalization and demands for democratic
reforms. For a continent which continues to be projected as primitive and underdeveloped, it is easy to spread these misconceptions and misrepresentations to the international community and for the same to accept that bad leadership is a heritage Africa is incapable of escaping. (Maathai 1995)

When the elite are corrupt and control the media, ordinary citizens cannot tell their story or dissent. Fostering inter-tribal conflict is a strategy employed by the elite to disrupt and protect against an open political system and civil society. Tribal nationalism was made easier by the artificial geographic boundaries created by the British as a means of control.

Properly guided, the Kenyan tribes (and elsewhere) would live together peacefully as they have done for generations and would negotiate over whatever differences emerge, now that certain resources like land are diminishing and as populations continue to increase. Negotiations rather than inter-tribal fighting would be their option . . . It is important to emphasize that it is not the tribes who want to fight, rather, it is the threatened elitist leaders who are using tribes to arouse ethnic nationalism as the only way they can continue to cling to political and economic power and the privileges which that power comes with. (Maathai 1995)

It is advantageous to these African dictators to argue that democracy is a western value that cannot work in Africa. Yet core principles of democracy are inherently African. Maathai suggests that African countries need leaders who can put forward a vision of an African-centered democracy, rather than one that is rooted in Eurocentric imperialism and capitalism. These leaders would center the interests, histories, knowledge base, and capacities of their citizenry. Early postcolonial leaders such as Nyerere and Nkrumah offered this kind of leadership; “Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana is said to have urged Africans to seek first the political freedom and all else would be added unto them” (Maathai 1995). In her work building democracy, Maathai warns that until African leaders center the interests of their people, civil unrest will continue.

International investments are important and an open market is desired, but unless one has a government which cares about its people, it is difficult to see how any development model designed and carried out by an international community which comes to Africa to make profits would generate wealth for the African people. So far they have only been ripped off. The continent is wealthy but the
wealth is mined by and for the benefit of others outside the region. (Maathai 1995)

The corrupt dictators who continue to rule many African countries maintain power through control of natural resources and people. Nairobi, Kenya, has witnessed the grabbing of open spaces by corrupt leaders in order to develop expensive housing and sports complexes for the elite. Other citizens are then left without public facilities or urban green spaces. These leaders must maintain control of natural resources in order to participate in the global market as defined by rules set in the North, and they must maintain a weak, unhealthy, uneducated, illiterate, disempowered citizenry in order to prevent dissent.

It is convenient for the North to point a finger at Africa and say the countries there should support democracy, yet the North perpetuates the exploitation of the South in many ways. Thus, peace becomes a global issue and a global responsibility.

So, as we speak about commodities and communities it is important to be concerned about justice. What is the truth about Africa’s international debts? When does stealing become a crime at the international level? Perhaps when the truth around the secret financial transactions in Africa is revealed and finally exposed, the world will be as shocked on how Africa was economically crippled, as it is dismayed when it now comprehends the atrocities of the transoceanic Slave Trade or the Jewish Holocaust in Europe during the second World War. (Maathai 1995)

Indeed, much of the foreign aid coming to Africa is not intended to address root causes but rather to remediate symptoms. There are few funds for education, capacity building, infrastructure, or for the “development of their own cultural, spiritual and social programs which would empower people and release their creative energy” (Maathai 1995). Programs such as these would work against the interests of the donor agencies.

This state of affairs should not be encouraged by international trade transactions which promote growth for some regions of the world and stagnation, regression and impoverishment for others. It is inequitable, unjust, irresponsible and destroys the local environment. It is trade which contributes to impoverishment of Africa.
much more than the population numbers *per se*. Yet the focus for poverty alleviation in Africa is often tagged to the population increase and environmental degradation. (Maathai 1995)

So while peace and democracy can be presented as the responsibility of individual countries, this is in reality a decoy of the North to prevent loss of power. As demonstrated by the Green Belt Movement, adult education can play a central role in fostering an informed citizenry about these dynamics and how to resist them.

*Poverty, Health, and Environment*

The Green Belt Movement grew out of some of the most pressing issues faced by the citizens of Kenya. These issues included malnutrition, disease, poverty, fuel wood shortage, unclean water or water scarcity, and lack of economic opportunity. All of these issues share a root cause: colonialism. Colonialism led to the creation of a market economy in Kenya that necessitated the exploitation and destruction of the natural environment. The cutting of indigenous forests for plantation agriculture and development of infrastructure resulted in loss of biodiversity, loss of a renewable wood source, soil erosion, loss of habitat that maintained clean and available water, and loss of place. This resulted in changed cooking habits as women shifted to preparing foods that took less fuel. These foods were purchased, rather than grown, because local garden plots disappeared. The British created this local market for the foods they were producing with local goods. These processed foods had little nutritional value, and poor health ensued. The decline in human health in rural Kenya and the decline in environmental health are intimately connected and foster a cycle of poverty that exacerbates both. The results include internally displaced people, refugees, ethnic clashes, outbreaks of disease and malnutrition, environmental devastation, and decreased life expectancy.

What is the reason for this economic marginalization and impoverishment of
Africa? It is partly because many of them do not participate in formulating and implementing their development policies. Decisions which affect their economic and political life are made by others in foreign capitals in the company of a few of their ruling elites. These are the policies and decisions which facilitate the siphoning of their wealth, literally from under their feet. In the process they are marginalized and disempowered economically, denied access to information, knowledge and resources and forced to over mine their environment thereby, jeopardizing even their future generations. (Maathai 1995)

Population is often blamed as the source of poverty in Africa, and poverty is framed as the cause of poor health and environmental degradation. This strategy of blame benefits those counties who do not want to change their way of life.

The fact that 75% of the world’s resources are, for example, consumed by industrial countries with only 20% of the world population is far greater reason for the impoverishment of many in the world than the mere numbers. A depopulated Africa would still be poor and marginalized. But in sub-Saharan Africa 100 million of people are reported to be food insecure and many countries in the sub-region depend on food imports and emergency food aid. Therefore, millions never have enough to eat, are undernourished and are suffering from parasitic infestations and diseases associated with malnutrition and poor sanitation. (Maathai 1995)

Maathai’s perspective is that in order to truly address environmental issues, one must understand how the environment, health, and poverty are related to each other and to larger issues of democracy.

In my part of the world, environmental degradation is brought about by soil erosion, deforestation, pollution and loss of biological diversity in our earth systems. These in turn are brought about by political and economic policies and activities which are dictated by greed, corruption, incompetence and an insatiable desire to satisfy the inflated egos and ambitions of those who wield political and economic power. They are exacerbated by population pressure, international debts and interest rates, low prices for export goods, commodity protectionsm and inevitable and debilitating poverty . . . But the majority of people at the bottom of the pyramid are both the causes and the symptoms of environmental degradation. They are caught in a vicious cycle of poverty and underdevelopment. (Maathai 1994)

The issues must be addressed at both a local and global scale: local in terms of educating people about root causes and re-centering African knowledge and values; global in terms of challenging
oppressive systems and unjust development policies.

Adult education can and should play a role in this teaching about root causes and re-centering knowledge. The Green Belt Movement recognized the value in the indigenous knowledge base that had maintained human and environmental health for centuries.

In traditional African societies food security was at the family level even though there was also a collective responsibility in the community for food security for all. Seasons were synchronized and there was a living culture associated with food production, seed selection and post-harvest storage. Important structures at every homestead included granaries for grains and beans while certain crops like bananas, sugarcanes, roots crops and green vegetables were always available in the field, and especially between harvests. (Maathai 1995)

Colonialism introduced cash crops and a cash economy, which devalued and destroyed traditional farming culture. Homestead granaries disappeared, and people became increasingly dependent on food bought from shops. The loss of indigenous species and introduction of non-native species resulted in both changed environmental conditions, such as lack of water, but also in changed social conditions such as the loss of indigenous knowledge. The loss of this knowledge facilitates participation in the market economy, which contributes to environmental degradation, poverty, and poor health. Even after Kenya gained independence, the notion of food security derived from the government instead of the traditional family structure persisted.

Continued reliance on the cash crops meant that agricultural products valued in foreign exchange (like coffee, nuts, tea, and flowers) were prioritized and traditional food crops ignored. Indeed the only farming sector that receives adequate attention is that which deals with cash crops. “Unfortunately, farmers are paid little for their crops and payments are often delayed. Therefore, many families sustain hunger and malnutrition in places where their own parents and grandparents had surplus food” (Maathai 1995).
“You Don’t Need a Diploma to Plant a Tree”

From the start, Maathai recognized the importance of local, indigenous, and gendered knowledge as well as the power of education to liberate. These beliefs are rooted in her own experience and are represented in the values and mission of the Green Belt Movement. They inform a culturally grounded approach to community development that fosters agency and centers African experience.

One of the ways the GBM practices its commitment to local knowledge is by using local languages in its adult education programs. Many of the participants in Green Belt Movement programs, while intelligent, are functionally illiterate and have not had much formal education. This contributes to their marginalization in society and their self-image.

Perhaps because Africa did not have its own alphabets, literacy is an over-valued asset and education and the ability to read and write has been over emphasized and equated with extraordinary abilities. And illiterate people over-trust those who can read and write under-value and underestimate themselves. This poor self-image and lack of self-confidence nurture an inferiority complex which puts illiterate citizens at the mercy of literate members of society. (Maathai 1995)

The transition from local languages to foreign languages occurred during colonialism. Then, many post-independence leaders adopted the imperial European languages as the official languages. In schools children learn these official languages,

Therefore, from the onset, children are cut off from much of family and community conversation and exchanges. The children gradually become alienated from the community's culture and values and identify with the culture and values of the foreign people about whom they read and talk. (Maathai 1995)

The result is that people came to equate education and therefore intellect and progress with the ability to use these languages. The elite who had been able pursue formal education had a way to control what information reached the masses, since media was required to operate using the official language. “It is partly fear of an informed civil society which forces governments to ban
local pamphlets and news letters in local languages” (Maathai 1995). The privileging of English in Kenya had huge implications on Kenyan people, which the Green Belt Movement works to address through its reclamation and application of local languages.

While all of the adult education activities of the Green Belt Movement operate in local languages, some of the programs specifically address the issue of empowerment as it relates to racial, cultural, and gendered identity. This part of the curricula in programs such as Civic and Environmental Education are based on an understanding of the role language can play in self-pride.

Inability to communicate effectively dis-empowers people, gives them an inferiority complex, kills their self-confidence and destroys creative energy. It minimizes indigenous knowledge and expertise, makes people perpetual students of the glorified foreign ways of life and encourages them to despise their own culture and values.

Insisting on foreign languages for universal functional literacy in Africa is tragic because literacy, use of own language and culture are very important in human development and in cultivating self-worth, self-confidence and self-pride. (Maathai 1995)

The Green Belt Movement understands the power of language to express worldview, as well as the “philosophy inherent and indigenous to that people” (Maathai 1995). Language, like other components of culture, is essential in preserving and evolving traditional knowledge and spiritual heritage.

African Liberation

A key message that is related to adult education in the Green Belt Movement is that the traditional African worldview, manifested through culture, language, knowledge, values, and spiritual heritage, is essential to the well being of both Africans and the environment. This particular worldview, which reflects Maatian principles of right relationship, offers a way of being in the world that is non-exploitive and holistic. Indeed, one of the long-term objectives of
the Movement as articulated in the first Green Belt Movement Manual expresses a commitment
to this worldview:

To encourage spiritual and cultural values which link people with their roots and
with Nature and God. Traditional values and systems have been eroded, under
valued and destroyed in the process of colonization, westernization and modern
modes of development. In that process many people have become economically,
socially, politically and culturally marginalized. It is the traditional, spiritual and
cultural values which can contribute towards restoration of self-confidence, self
empowerment and recognition of the person as the greater resource to self and
country. (Maathai 1991, 9)

This worldview has been passed through the generations through art, stories, myths, ceremonies,
customs, and music. The heritage of this worldview is the historical record, which must be
included in education if it is to help inform the future.

This heritage gives them self-identity, self-confidence and self respect. It allows
them to be in harmony with their physical and spiritual environment. It is the
basis for their personal peace, or lack of it. This heritage also enhances their
capacity for self-leadership, decision-making and self-guidance. It is their
antennae into the unknown future and their reference point into their past.
Without such guidelines in the community there can be no peace at the personal
or even at the community level. (Maathai 1995, 15)

Through years of domination, many African people have been robbed of their heritage, and in
essence their humanity.

By the end of the process of colonization, de-culturalization, and de-
spiritualization of Africans had become perfected. They had no country, no
capital, no culture and no spiritual philosophy to guide them. (Maathai 1995)

In response, disempowered communities begin to ask themselves what is needed for liberation.
Therefore, within the Green Belt Movement a primary aim of education became the re-centering
this African heritage, including the story of colonization as a root cause of current conditions.

Ultimately the Green Belt Movement is a movement about liberation. It approaches
liberation through adult education that addresses the relationships between different forms of
oppression, exploitation, and injustice.
All through the ages the African people have made efforts to deliver themselves from oppressive forces. It is important that a critical mass of Africans do not accept the verdict that the world tries to push down their throat so as to give up and succumb. The struggle must continue. In the middle of this century for example, Africa set out to rekindle the spirit of self-liberation from colonial powers. And some three decades ago, the political leaders of modern Africa identified three major objectives, as they became the first post-colonial African rulers:

- To decolonize the entire continent
- To promote unity
- To effect economic and social development

A more difficult agenda will be to de-colonize the mind and re-claim the cultural and spiritual heritage of the African people. It is not an easy battle to fight because five hundred years is a long time to struggle against all forms of oppression. To overcome such a historical burden is an enormous task because the battles of five centuries have left Africans weakened economically, politically but especially, culturally and spiritually. (Maathai 1995)

Africans and members of the Diaspora have a rich tradition of fighting for justice and leading social change. There are many Righteous Leaders who have come before who have modeled Righteous Commitment to liberation and who led the way. This heritage is a source of pride. To carry on the tradition of working on behalf of the common good, Maathai calls on us to lead by example, to live our commitments daily, and to take responsibility for the kind of world and the kind of communities we want to live in.

We can work together for a better world with men and women of goodwill, those who radiate the intrinsic goodness of humankind. To do so effectively, the world needs a global ethic with values which give meaning to life experiences and, more than religious institutions and dogmas, sustain the non-material dimension of humanity. Mankind's universal values of love, compassion, solidarity, caring and tolerance should form the basis for this global ethic which should permeate culture, politics, trade, religion and philosophy . . . Without such an ethic the power game, materialism and individualism takes over. So also would anarchy, egoism, hatred, injustices, violence and intolerance. We must make our choice or others, less sympathetic, will make that choice for us. (Maathai 1995)
Implications for Future Research and Practice

The primary purpose of this research was to introduce Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement to the field of adult education, in her own words and on her own terms. This work lays a foundation for future research by presenting her life and work primarily from her perspective.

Comparative Studies

At a fundamental level, this research seeks to add excluded histories to the adult education literature. Maathai’s life and work contributes to a history and tradition of great liberatory leaders. A natural question emerging out of this work might be how this movement and her leadership compare and contrast with other liberatory movements and leaders, particularly contemporaries living through similar points in history or geography. A conceptual comparison might include an exploration of the philosophies and their application of various liberatory African leaders. Or it might examine the significant events in the formation of their philosophies.

Liberatory Environmental Movements

In the literature of the field there is little that links environmental movements with other kinds of social or liberatory movements, yet we know from this study that environment is intimately connected to issues of power, politics and economics, and to culture. Particularly in postcolonial contexts, or in contexts where Euro-American domination occurs, exploitation of nature and exploitation of people must be examined in relationship to each other. Indeed, this is precisely the message the Nobel Committee wanted to share with the world when they awarded the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize to an environmentalist. As adult educators we must not approach
education from a mechanistic and compartmentalized view but rather seek to understand the 
social, political and economic dimensions of environmental problems.

Our movement into the twenty-first century is momentous not because it is a 
millennium turning point or a movement into some kind of postmodern history, 
nor because we are moving from an industrial age into a new information age. 
The period in which we are living is not simply a turning point in human history; 
it is a turning point in the very history of the earth itself. We are living in a period 
of the earth’s history that is incredibly turbulent and in an epoch in which there 
are violent processes of change that challenge us at every level imaginable. The 
pathos of the human being today is that we are totally caught up in this incredible 
transformation and we have a significant responsibility for the direction it will 
take. What is terrifying is that we have it within our power to make life extinct on 
this planet. Because of the magnitude of this responsibility for the planet, all our 
educational ventures must finally be judged within this order of magnitude. This 
is the challenge for all areas of education. For education, this realization is the 
bottom line. When setting educational priorities, every educational endeavor must 
keep in mind the immense implications of our present moment. This demands an 
attentiveness to our present planetary situation that does not go into slumber or 
denial. It poses significant challenges to educators in areas heretofore unimagined. 
Education within the context of “transformative vision” keeps concerns for the 
totality of life’s context always at the forefront. (O’Sullivan 2002, 2)

Environmental change is predicated on social change. While it is true that some environmental 
change occurs naturally, humans have the capacity to accelerate or decelerate change in various 
directions. We have a responsibility to future generations, not to mention the rest of the species 
we share the planet with, to ensure a healthy and sustainable world.

A Critique of the Green Belt Movement

The story of Wangari Maathai and adult education in the Green Belt Movement told here 
relied on her words and perspectives. What would her critics say? Some might suggest that the 
reliance of the movement on the international community made it dependent on outside interests. 
What costs were there to participants in the Movement? To families or community members of 
those involved? Questions such as these are important in understanding the multidimensional 
impact of a large movement and organization such as this. Our understanding of the Movement
and adult education within it would be expanded by research that offers a critique based on
different data sources.

A Womanist Lens

As mentioned in Chapter One, a Womanist Lens would be a relevant and compelling
perspective from which to examine adult education in The Green Belt Movement. The
Movement started as a grassroots initiative for and by the women of Kenya. Colonialism and
neo-colonialism disproportionately have affected African women and women of the African
Diaspora. Their experiences of intersecting oppressions and their corresponding capacities to
survive and thrive offer the field important perspectives on the issue of social justice and
liberation.

A Final Word

In the field of adult education, we often center our conversations on knowledge as it
relates to matters of teaching and learning. Emergent discussions in the field reflect an increasing
interest in the ways in which our worldview influences how we make meaning. Our worldview
informs how we understand our relationships with each other and our environment, and is
learned (socially constructed through culture).

Worldview refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs through which an
individual interprets the world and interacts with it. A worldview describes a
consistent (to a varying degree) and integral sense of existence and provides a
framework for generating, sustaining, and applying knowledge.

A worldview responds to questions such as “What is right? What is true? What actions should
one take? Where should one head?”
Some cultures, including African cultures, foster a worldview in which relationships between humans, nature, and the divine are relationships of mutuality. Harmony and reciprocity are valued. Humans, nature, and the divine are considered part of the same whole, and so to do harm to a tree is to do harm to oneself or one’s ancestor. Exploitation and domination do not have a place in this framework. As noted by Hord and Lee, a generative theme in the Black intellectual tradition is “a fundamentally relational concept of reality.”

In the same way that individuals and communities are inextricably related, so too are all other dimensions of reality. Physical objects, for example, cannot truly be separated from the uses to which they are put, uses that are themselves necessarily essentially human. Nor can such objects be separated from the natural materials of which they are made, from the geographical and temporal references of their existence, or from their specific relations to what, for want of a more accurate term, we might describe as the divine. Dona Richards has captured this theme of black thought, making special reference to its spiritual aspect. “The traditional African view of the universe is as a spiritual whole in which all beings are organically interrelated and interdependent,” she writes. “The cosmos is sacred and cannot be objectified. Nature is spirit, not be exploited . . . All beings exist in reciprocal relationship to one another; we cannot take without giving . . . The mode of harmony (rather than control) which prevails does not preclude the ability to struggle. Spirit is primary, yet manifested in material being.” (1995, 8)

In a 1995 speech to the United Nations, Maathai called for a global ethic. In my view this ethic must be rooted in the principle of serudj-ta: renewing, repairing and restoring the world. As adult educators, change agents, community developers, parents, children, lovers, and citizens of the world, we have a responsibility to this. Indeed, our lives depend on it. Our curricula must reflect it. Our programs must embody it. We must stand by it in Righteous Commitment. In the end, Righteous Commitment is about sacrifice. Wisdom comes from knowing in a deep way what you are giving up. It is also about courage to stand firm in the dark night. As a field, if we have any commitment at all to peace on earth, we must teach about structured forms of exploitation and domination, whether that be in terms of racism or over-consumptive use of natural resources. Or
in the words of Wangari Maathai, “We are called to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own” (Maathai 2004, Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech).
Afterward: Facing Future

I am completing this research on the eve of the inauguration of the first African American President of the United States, Barack Obama. As a historian and Africanist I would be remiss not to mention the way these two Righteous Leaders and their stories are intertwined.

To begin, they are both citizens of the world, but in particular citizens of Kenya and the United States. I refer to citizens not in the legal sense here, but in the sense of belonging to a place. This belonging is grounded in culture, lived experience, and affinity. Wangari Maathai was born and spent most of her life in Kenya working on behalf of the Kenyan people—to reclaim government, to reclaim democracy for and by the people, and ultimately to heal through action. Barack Obama spent most of his life in the United States doing the same thing on behalf of the American people. As some point in his life, Obama embarked on a search for his roots because he wanted to understand his Kenyan father and the place his father was from. Maathai was deeply affected by the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Obama by his search for his father. Both his father and Maathai were part of the Kennedy Airlift, which brought bright young Kenyans to study in the United States.

Although they are separated by age, these two leaders share a very deep commitment to the practice of serudj-ta. Their messages of unity and justice, reciprocity and truth are reflective of a modern manifestation of Maat. These leaders call us together to be our highest selves, to reclaim and restore our world toward some sort of balance, some sort of renewal. Their leadership is rooted in particular African and American values of freedom.
Reference List


Hord, Frank Lee (Mzee Lasana Okpara) and Jonathon Scott Lee, eds. 1995. *I am because we are: Readings in Black philosophy*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.


Appendix A: Confidentiality Agreement

Interview Participant

August 19, 2008

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an interview that will take place in November 2008. Material from this interview may be used in a dissertation study to be completed by May 2009. This form outlines the purposes of the study and provides a description of your involvement and rights as a participant.

I consent to participate in a research project conducted by Jennifer L. Kushner, a doctoral student at National-Louis University located in Chicago, Illinois.

I understand that this study is entitled A Historical Inquiry of Wangari Maathai: A Visionary African Adult Educator. The purpose of this study is to introduce Wangari Maathai as a visionary African adult educator to the field of adult education. This historical inquiry will identify and discuss Maathai’s philosophy and how it has informed the adult education activities of the Green Belt Movement.

I understand that my participation will consist of one interview lasting 1 – 2 hours in length with a possible second, follow-up interview to be conducted over the phone or face to face. The interview will be tape recorded and transcribed. I understand that I will receive a copy of my transcribed interview at which time I may clarify information.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and can be discontinued at any time without prejudice until the completion of the dissertation.

I understand that only the researcher, Jennifer L. Kushner, will have access to a secured file cabinet in which will be kept all transcripts, taped recordings, and field notes from the interview(s) in which I participated. The person doing transcription will also have copies of the tape recordings.

I understand that the results of this study may be published or otherwise reported to scientific bodies, and at my request, my identity will be revealed.

I understand that in the event I have questions or require additional information I may contact the researcher: Jennifer L. Kushner, 6105 Rivercrest Drive, McFarland WI 53558 USA, (xxx) xxx-xxxx.

If you have any concerns or questions before or during participation that you feel have not been addressed by me, you may contact my Secondary Advisor and Research Committee Member: Dr. Thomas Heaney, National Louis University, 122 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois, 60603, 312-261-3274; Email address: theaney@nl.edu

Participant’s Signature ____________________________ Date ____________

Researcher’s Signature ____________________________ Date ____________
Appendix B: Confidentiality Agreement
Data Transcription

This confidentiality form articulates the agreement made between Jennifer L. Kushner, the researcher, and Voss Transcription.

I understand and acknowledge that by transcribing the audiotapes provided to me by Jennifer L. Kushner, that I will be exposed to confidential information about the research study and the research participants. In providing transcription services, at no time will I reveal or discuss any of the information of which I have been exposed.

In addition, at no time will I maintain copies of the electronic or paper documents generated. Further, upon completing each transcription, I agree to provide the electronic and paper documents to the researcher:

Jennifer L. Kushner
6105 Rivercrest Drive
McFarland WI 53558 USA
(XXX) XXX-XXXX

I understand that a breach of this agreement as described above could result in personal and professional harm to the research participants for which I will be held legally responsible.

Transcriptionist’s Signature __________________________ Date ______________

Researcher’s Signature __________________________ Date ______________
Appendix C: Appearance Release
Film Participants

I authorize Marlboro Productions, LLC ("Producer"), Producer’s agents, successors, assigns, and designees to record my name, likeness, image, voice, sound effects, interview and performance on film, tape, or otherwise (the "Recording"), edit such Recording as Producer may desire, and incorporate such Recording into the film with the working title “Roots of Change: The Vision of Wangari Maathai” (the “Film”), any versions of the Film and all related materials thereof, including but not limited to promotion and advertising materials. It is understood and agreed that Producer shall retain final editorial, artistic and technical control of the Film. Producer may use, and authorize others to use, the Film, any portions and versions thereof, in all markets, manner, formats and media, whether now known or hereafter developed, throughout the world, in perpetuity. Producer, and Producer’s successors and assigns, shall own all right, title and interest, including the copyright, in and to the Film, including the Recording and related materials, to be used and disposed of, without limitation, as Producer shall in its sole discretion determine.

I further grant to Producer and other persons and entities designated by Producer the right to use my name, likeness, and biographical material in such manner as Producer may determine for promotional and advertising purposes relating to Producer or to the Film or any version or related materials thereof.

Name: __________________________  Signature: __________________________  Date: __________________________  Address/Tel: __________________________

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