



The genius of Wangari Maathai

Anna Lappé and Frances Moore Lappé, Thursday, October 14, 2004

CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts Several prominent Norwegians have questioned the Nobel Committee for awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Wangari Maathai. Why honor environmental activism in an era when war, terrorism and nuclear proliferation are even more urgent problems?

What they miss is Dr. Maathai's special genius.

The first time we met Maathai was four years ago in an airy guesthouse beneath towering jacaranda trees on the outskirts of Nairobi. At the time, the Green Belt Movement she had founded nearly 25 years earlier was still struggling against the ruthless regime of President Daniel arap Moi.

Maathai planted seven trees on Earth Day in 1977 to honor Kenyan women environmental leaders. Then, recognizing that deforestation could only be reversed if village women throughout her country became tree planters themselves, she launched the Green Belt Movement. Government foresters laughed at her idea of enlisting villagers; it took trained foresters to plant trees, they told her.

Because Maathai didn't listen, today Kenya has 30 million more trees, all planted by village women.

Maathai's genius is in recognizing the interrelation of local and global problems, and the fact that they can only be addressed when citizens find the voice and courage to act. Maathai saw in the Green Belt Movement both a good in itself, and a way in which women could discover they were not powerless in the face of autocratic husbands, village chiefs and a ruthless president. Through creating their own tree nurseries - at least 6,000 throughout Kenya - and planting trees, women began to control the supply of their own firewood, an enormous power shift that also freed up time for other pursuits.

Then, through popular education, village women - who had watched public forests be used by the Moi regime to grant political favors - began to see forests differently, as something they, as citizens, had a claim to.

Through the Green Belt Movement, village women also came to see that a narrow focus on export commodities, such as coffee, at the expense of environmentally appropriate food crops, was an inheritance of colonialism reinforced by IMF policies.

That, too, they could change.

Through a village food-security campaign, Green Belt members are learning to re-establish indigenous crops using organic methods and to reintroduce kitchen gardens - a skill many had lost in the wake of government-promoted export-oriented agriculture.

Over the years, Maathai and members of the Movement have been jailed and even beaten for their protests of government anti-environment actions. One of the movement's organic-farming educators described to us how he was almost arrested for promoting sustainable agriculture. The government, it turned out, had lucrative contracts with major chemical agriculture companies; the teachers' education posed a serious threat.

Maathai has also become a leader in international debt-relief efforts. By the time we traveled to Kenya in 2000, the Green Belt Movement had grown into a major pro-democracy force.

In 2002, Maathai decided to run for a seat in Parliament. She beat her opponent 50 to 1. Women, we were told, danced in the streets of Nairobi for joy. A few weeks later, when President arap Moi stepped down after holding power for more than two decades, Maathai was appointed deputy minister of the environment.

We last saw Maathai in May this year at a gathering in New York. She said she was helping write a new constitution for Kenya. "We are working on a Bill of Rights, only ours," she said, with her irrepressible grin, "will include rights not only for human beings, but for animals and the environment."

We recalled our time in Kenya where we saw many village women wearing a Green Belt Movement T-shirt. The T-shirt says simply, "As for me, I've made a choice." In selecting Dr. Maathai, perhaps the Nobel Committee wants us to recognize that the real hope for peace, both with each other and with the earth itself, lies in the choices - individual and collective - of empowered citizens.

Bringing this insight to life is Wangari Maathai's genius.

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