



Wangari Maathai for Women

Thirty years ago, in the country of Kenya, 90% of the forest had been chopped down.



Without trees to hold the topsoil in place, the land became like a desert. When the women and girls would go in search of firewood in order to prepare their family meals, they would have to spend hours and hours looking for what few branches remained.

A woman named Wangari watched all of this happening, and decided that there must be a way to take better care of the land, and to take better care of the women and girls. So she planted a tree. And then she planted another. She wanted to plant thousands of trees, but she realized that it would take a very long time if she was the only one doing it.

So she taught the women who were looking for firewood to plant trees, and they were paid a small amount for each sapling they grew.

Soon she organized women all over the country to plant trees, and a movement called the Green Belt Movement took hold, and with each passing year, more and more trees covered the land.

But something else was happening as the women planted those trees. Something else besides those trees was taking root. The women began to have confidence in themselves. They began to see that they could make a difference.

They began to see that they were capable of many things, and that they were equal to the men. They began to recognize that they were deserving of being treated with respect and dignity.

Changes like these were threatening to some. The Kenyan president didn't like any of this, and police were sent to intimidate and beat Wangari for planting trees, and for planting ideas of equality and democracy in people's heads, especially in the brains of the women.

She was accused of "subversion" and arrested many times, and once, while Wangari was trying to plant trees, she was clubbed by guards hired by developers who wanted the lands cleared. She was hospitalized with head injuries. She survived, and it only made her realize that she was on the right path.

For almost thirty years, she was threatened physically, and she was often ridiculed in the press. But she didn't flinch. She only had to look in the eyes of her three children, and in the eyes of the thousands of women and girls who were blossoming right along with the trees, and she found the strength to continue.

And that is how it came to be that 30 million trees have been planted in Africa, one tree at a time. The landscapes -- both the external one of the land and the internal one of the people -- have been transformed.

In 2002, the people of Kenya held a democratic election, and the president who opposed Wangari and her Green Belt Movement is no longer in office. At the age of 65, Wangari is now Kenya's Assistant Minister for the

Environment, and in 2004 she planted one more tree in celebration and thanksgiving for being given a very great honor:

Wangari Maathai was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She is the first African woman to receive this award. After she was notified, she gave a speech entitled, "What Do Trees Have To Do With Peace?"

She pointed out how most wars are fought over limited natural resources, such as oil, land, coal or diamonds. She called for an end to corporate greed, and for leaders to build more just societies. She added: "Our recent experience in Kenya gives hope to all who have been struggling for a better future. It shows it is possible to bring about positive change, and still do it peacefully. All it takes is courage and perseverance, and a belief that positive change is possible.

That is why the slogan for our campaign was "It is Possible!"

"On behalf of all African women, I want to express my profound appreciation for this honor, which will serve to encourage women in Kenya, in Africa, and around the world to raise their voices and not to be deterred."

"When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and seeds of hope. We also secure the future for our children. I call on those around the world to celebrate by planting a tree wherever you are."

As she received the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo, she invited us all to get involved:

"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."