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Wangari Maathai helped us to 'rise up and walk'

Sharon Abercrombie | Oct. 4, 2011 Eco Catholic

Nowhere in Wangari Maathai?s official biography as founder of the Green Belt Movement is there mention of a song written to honor her environmental work. But there is one. In late October of 2006, when the Nobel Prize laureate visited Berkeley, California to give a talk at First Congregational Church, she was welcomed on stage by Orcas Island composer and singer Sharon Abreau.

?Wangari,? Abreau serenaded, ?You shine bright as the morning star. You have helped us to understand that peace on earth needs a living hand.?

This writer was there that night in the packed house, covering her talk for an Oakland newspaper. If memory serves correctly, Abreau had all of us chanting the refrain along with her. I wish I could recall its melody. It seems especially fitting during these recent, sad days to sing Abreau?s chant again, to offer it as a musical gift for Wangari Maathai to have in her new home.

Last Sunday, Sept. 25, this ?bright morning star? moved away from us into the galaxy of eternity. Wangari Maathai died of ovarian cancer in Nairobi, Kenya, with her three children at her side. She was 71.

?She left us too soon,? said Stephen D. Minnis, president of Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, in an on-line press release. Benedictine College, formerly known as Mount St. Scholastica, is Maathai?s alma mater.

A cradle Catholic, Maathai received her early religious training from a group of Italian missionary Sisters in her Kenyan village before coming to the United States. She graduated from Mount St. Scholastica in 1964 with a degree in biology, later earning advanced science degrees from the University of Pittsburgh in Germany, and finally obtaining a doctoral degree from the University of Nairobi where she began teaching veterinary anatomy.

?When you were with Wangari Maathai, you knew you were in the presence of greatness, but she put you perfectly at ease,? recalled Minnis. ?She had such a winning personality and strong will. It is hard to imagine this world without her. We are lucky she has walked amongst us and she will be sorely missed.?

Known as ?Mary Jo,? around the campus, Maathai ?was a talented science major whom one nun predicted ?would give every ounce of energy to the biology she is loved.?

And she did.

Maathai helped us all understand that peace on earth literally needs a living hand. She provided not just one living hand, but millions of them.

In 1976, while serving on the National Council of Women, she conducted research that linked problems with the Kenyan economy and society to deforestation. Her findings resulted in the Green Belt Movement, an effort in

which she and her mostly women?s group?s of activists planted over 30 million trees throughout the country to produce sustainable wood for fuel use and to combat soil erosion. She assisted nearly 900,000 women to establish tree nurseries and plant trees to reserve the effects of deforestation.

The Greenbelt Movement earned her the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for furthering the cause of the environment, women?s empowerment and human rights. She is the only African woman to be awarded the Nobel and the only Nobel winner who is a graduate of a Catholic College in America.

Winning a Nobel did not mean that Maathai was universally accepted in her own country. Like many other environmental and peace prophets, she frequently was at odds with police and government officials.

According to the Greenbelt website, she was beaten and jailed on several occasions for campaigning against deforestation in Africa. Kenya?s former president Daniel arap Moi was totally unsupportive. One government official in Moi?s administration told her, ?If you would only plant trees, we wouldn?t bother you. But because you are talking about corruption and misgovernance, we don?t like you.?

At one point, Maathai had to take refuge in a safe house to avoid being murdered.

She and her husband, Mwang, a member of parliament, divorced in the 1980?s because of her activism. In her biography, *Unbowed*, she writes that he called her ?too educated, too, strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control. ?

Several major points from Maathai?s Berkeley talk provide valuable memories of her life and philosophy. That night, she told us when she began her environmental work, she didn?t initially anticipate taking on the establishment. All she knew was, her beloved homeland was much different from what it was before she studied at Mt. Scholastica and then at the University of Nair in Germany.

She recalled an idyllic childhood spent in nature. The weather was perfect and she could drink clean water from the local streams. She reminisced about gathering slate-colored frog?s eggs out of the stream, watching them slip through her fingers, glimmering like cultured pearls.

But when she returned to Kenya in the late ?60s, many of the beautiful forests had been replaced by cash crops of coffee, tea and sugar cane. ?Cutting down the indigenous forests and replacing them with exotic species of trees caused everything else to die,? she said.

As she became involved in the women?s movement, Maathai heard the complaints about the polluted drinking water which was sickening the children, the droughts that were killing the nomads, their animals, and the ruined forests, which were the source of their firewood needed for cooking.

Maathai realized these ills were part of a deeper problem -- bad government policies. ?It was necessary to change the political system to save the environment,? she said. ?We needed a holistic solution to remove a repressive system which had ruled for 40 years.?

But holistic reform can be as difficult to bring about at the grass roots level as it is at the top Maathai learned.

?People are afraid. Their fear and their hopelessness and their ignorance make them very heavy. It takes a lot to get to them to lift themselves up,? she told her Berkeley audience.

Maathai?s original work began woman by woman, tree by tree. Realizing that she was not dealing with university students, Maathai found herself getting involved in basic community organizing. She would tell the women to ?meet and decide what you want to do. Elect your leaders. Plant the trees only as far as you can walk. Teach the women in the next village to pant the trees. In this way, we are teaching one another to rise up and walk.?

Her plan included giving the women a small amount of money for their efforts, thus helping them to support their families.

Maathai likened the work to a story in Acts of the Apostles, when Peter and John healed a crippled man. They had no money to give to the beggar, but they gave him what they had: they healed him.

?Peter holds him by the hand, and the beggar needs to rise up and walk,? she said. ?He feels healed. He walked to the synagogue praising the Lord. I presume the beggar never comes back to beg.?

The beggar, she said, was ?at the bottom of powerlessness. Then someone gave him a hand and told him to rise up and walk.?

In 2002 Wangari Maathai served for a brief time in government, as assistant minister for environment and natural resources in Kenya?s parliament.

In 2009, she spoke at Thomas Berry?s memorial service at the Cathedral of St. John of the Divine in New York, according the Forum of Religion and Ecology.

In 2010 she wrote her second book, *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World.*

Achim Steiner, the United Nation?s s Under-Secretary General and Executive Director for the UN?s Environmental Program, this week praised Matthai ?as a force of nature. She was like the Acacias and the Prunus Africana trees, Wangari fought so nobly and assiduously to conserve, strong in character and able to survive sometimes the harshest of conditions. She was also immovable in the face of ignorance, political gamesmanship and wanton environmental destruction.?

In a February 2010 article for the *Daily Nation*, an African newspaper, Tom Odhlambo told of her unflagging dedication to forest preservation, including Nairobi?s own Uhuru Park.

?Without her, we wouldn?t be seeing or relaxing (there),? he wrote. ?She was the Moi regime?s nightmare -- opposing all kinds of attempts to excise government land such as Karura and Ngong forests. Maathai has walked the talk, like the evangelist of the gone days.?

In 2006, Maathai served as the patron of the newly launched UNEP Billion Trees campaign, inspiring thousands of people across the world to plant trees for the benefit of their communities. To date, over 11 billion trees have

been planted as part of the campaign, according to the UNEP press release.

Finally, here are some memorable quotes from this bright morning star who was Wangari Maathai:

- Concerning her early spiritual upbringing with the Italian Catholic Missionary Sisters: ?They served selflessly. They gave a hand, like Peter did. They are like flowers that bloom, that smile, even when you don?t give them water.?
- About the Benedictines: ?They treated me as if I were their daughter. They gave and gave to everyone. I think this is where I got my deep sense of service and my detachment from things material.?
- About being true to one?s self: ?Always follow a small voice that all of us have, a small voice that comes from deep within, a small voice that I have come to identify as the God in you. God whispers to you and if your heart is pure, you can hear it. Follow that voice. Be committed to it, be persistent with it, be patient with it.?

Wangari Maathai is survived by her three children, Waweru, Wanjira and Muta and her granddaughter, Ruth Wangari.

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