How does the simple act of planting trees lead to winning the Nobel Peace Prize? Ask Wangari Maathai of Kenya. In 1977, she suggested rural women plant trees to address problems stemming from a degraded environment. Under her leadership, their tree-planting grew into a nationwide movement to safeguard the environment, defend human rights and promote democracy. And brought Maathai the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004.
One element of Wangari and the Green Belt Movement’s (GBM) work that we really wanted to underscore in the film is the brilliant way they connected people’s fear with their inability to act, and the cycle of fear that living under an oppressive government engenders. In working with the rural women, Wangari recognized that not only had the land suffered under the oppression of colonialism and neocolonialism, but the women themselves and civil society as a whole had also been casualties.

The way people survive on the land they live on shapes their culture over time. When the culture is oppressed or destroyed, the results are devastating. The loss of culture combined with the loss of land and the constant fear had rendered ordinary Kenyans immobile. In doing nothing, they felt less and less worthy; they had lost their dignity, their sense of self-worth, and therefore any sense of the common good. For us, this was palpable in the Civic and Environmental Education Seminar we filmed that was so brilliantly facilitated by Green Belt Movement staff.

When people arrived at the seminar, they were timid. Their bodies showed that they were fearful. At the end of the first day, they were already changed; someone was listening to them. They discovered that they held the answers to their own problems. A transformation was taking place before our eyes.

We understood, more deeply than ever before, in learning about the history of colonialism and subsequent oppressive regimes in Kenya, that the mechanism of oppression — whether it is on a global, community, or familial level — is utterly destructive of people’s dignity and their connection to themselves and to their environment. By taking action to recover their degraded environment, the women and men of the Green Belt Movement are empowering themselves to protect their lands, to take back their voices, and to improve their circumstances. Thus, they are changing the mechanism of oppression and passing on a different story to their children.

It is our hope that *Taking Root* engages, inspires, and moves you to take actions that further environmental, social, and economic justice. Wangari Maathai has left us a great legacy. Her death leaves it up to each of us to carry a part of the load that she so gracefully and fearlessly carried for us during her life.

Lisa Merton and Alan Dater

Alan Dater and Lisa Merton, Directors/Producers
Taking Root tells the story of the late Wangari Muta Maathai, a remarkable and inspiring woman whose efforts to help the women of Kenya have had far-reaching environmental, social, and political effects. Maathai received the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize for her contributions to sustainable development, democracy, and peace, including founding the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. The Green Belt Movement is a visionary grassroots organization that gives meaning and structure to the lives of thousands of Kenyan women and their families by training them to plant and nurture trees as a means toward improving their environment and their livelihoods. Founded in 1977, the Green Belt Movement has not only helped to replant deforested land and damaged environments in Kenya, it has also led to the social and political empowerment of women and men throughout the country.

Historic footage of British colonial rulers and settlers and interviews with present-day activists provide the context for understanding Kenya’s environmental conditions. As colonists took up residence, they cleared land to plant cash crops, especially tea and coffee. The British regarded the native Kenyans as incapable of self-rule, and as the colonial power imposed a British-style government and way of life, the native culture of Kenya was largely destroyed. The Mau Mau liberation struggle of the early 1950s helped to pry loose the British hold on Kenya, which later gained its independence in 1963. The legacy of colonialism remained, however, reflected in the new government’s policies that continued ecological destruction for short-term economic gain.

While doing field research in rural communities during the 1970s, Wangari Maathai learned that women were having difficulty finding nutritious food, firewood, and clean drinking water. This information led her to focus attention on the country’s environmental problems, particularly deforestation, in order to bring about a transformation of the land. Maathai’s solution was a seemingly simple one: teach the women to plant trees to guarantee a future supply of wood for fuel; prevent soil erosion, which affects food production; and preserve water catchment areas. As the women gained confidence in their tree-planting skills and recognized the connections between the degraded environment and the problems they faced on a daily basis, they also became empowered socially and politically. Under Maathai’s leadership and through the Green Belt Movement, women and men organized and demonstrated. They joined forces with other pro-democracy groups against the corruption and policies of the government of Daniel arap Moi, which was taking part in the destruction of Kenya’s forests and parklands. During the nationwide efforts to change Kenya’s government, Maathai organized a demonstration and hunger strike by mothers of political prisoners of Moi’s regime to protest for the freedom of their sons.

In spite of violent oppression and public condemnation by the Kenyan government, Maathai and her followers prevailed. The government released its political prisoners and in the 2002 elections, Moi’s party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), was defeated after 24 years in power. Maathai’s outspoken advocacy on behalf of the environment, human rights, and democracy, alongside her leadership in educating the people of Kenya about their rights and responsibilities as citizens, inspired and empowered thousands to successfully demand political change in Kenya. The film is a testament to the power of ordinary people to effect major social and political change. It shows how an extraordinary leader can light a spark: What began as a tree-planting movement became an example of how “the little grassroots people…can change this world.”
SELECTED INDIVIDUALS FEATURED IN TAKING ROOT

Women of Kenya
Naomi Kabura Mukunu – Kirangari Mwireri Women’s Group
Leah Kisomo – Kyaume Network
Lilian Wanjiru Njehu – Kanyariri Mother’s Union Tree Nursery
Rebah Wasike – Wanyekwa Maramu Women’s Group
Rose Wabuke – Malaha Women’s Group
Ruth Wangari Thungu – mother of a political prisoner
Veronica Wambui Nduthu – mother of a political prisoner

Green Belt Movement (GBM)
Njogu Kahare – staff
Kinyanjui Kiungo – staff
Lilian Muchungi – staff
Frederick Njau – staff
Vertistine Mbaya – GBM board member

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Biographical Information on Wangari Muta Maathai

• Born: April 1, 1940 in Ihithe village, Tetu Constituency, Nyeri District of Kenya
• Education: Ihithe Primary School; St. Cecilia’s Intermediary Primary School, Loreto Convent Secondary School in Limuru, Kenya; BS, Mount St. Scholastica College (now Benedictine College), Kansas, 1964; MS, University of Pittsburgh, 1966; PhD in veterinary medicine, University of Nairobi, 1971
• Personal: Married Mwangi Mathai in 1969; divorced, 1979; three children
• Occupation: Environmentalist and political activist

Career Highlights:

• 1966-82 – Research assistant and faculty positions in the Department of Veterinary Anatomy at the University of Nairobi
• 1977 – Founded the Green Belt Movement
• 1981-87 – Served as a chairperson of the National Council of Women of Kenya
• 1989 – Led a successful protest against construction in Nairobi’s Uhuru Park
• 1997 – Ran unsuccessfully for president of Kenya
• 1998 – Co-chair of the Jubilee 2000 Africa Campaign
• 2002 – Elected to parliament as a candidate of the National Rainbow Coalition
• 2003 – Wrote The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience (Lantern Books)
• 2003-07 – Served as Assistant Minister in the Ministry of Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife
• 2004 – Won the Nobel Peace Prize
• 2005 – Launched the Mottainai campaign in Japan and Kenya
• 2006 – Wrote Unbowed: A Memoir (Knopf)
• 2006 – Co-founded the Nobel Women’s Initiative with sister Nobel Laureates
• 2006 – Launched the Billion Tree Campaign in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Prince Albert II of Monaco
• 2007 – Co-chair of the Congo Basin Forest Fund
• 2009 – Designated a UN Messenger of Peace by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon
• 2009 – Wrote The Challenge for Africa (Pantheon)
• 2010 – Became a trustee of the Karura Forest Environmental Education Trust
• 2010 – Established with the University of Nairobi the Wangari Maathai Institute of Peace and Environmental Studies (WMI)
• 2010 – Wrote Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World (Doubleday Religion)
• 2011 – Died in Nairobi, Kenya of ovarian cancer on September 25th.

In addition to the Nobel Peace Prize, Professor Maathai received numerous other awards. Those bestowed on her by governments include the Order of the Rising Sun (Japan, 2009), the Legion D’Honneur (France, 2006), and Elder of the Golden Heart and Elder of the Burning Spear (Kenya, 2004, 2003). Professor Maathai also received awards from many organizations and institutions throughout the world, including the Nelson Mandela Award for Health and Human Rights (2007); the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights Lifetime Achievement Award (2006); the Sophie Prize (2004); the Goldman Prize (1991); the Right Livelihood Award (1984); and honorary doctorates from Yale University and Morehouse College in the U.S., Ochanomizu University in Japan, and the University of Norway, among others.

A more comprehensive biography of Wangari Muta Maathai can be found here: http://greenbeltmovement.org/w.php?id=134
A full list of her honors and awards can be found here: http://greenbeltmovement.org/w.php?id=3
TAKING ROOT

It can be said that it "rains up" in the jungle, because so much moisture transpires from the leaves and evaporates into the atmosphere. This process of evapotranspiration affects rainfall not only in adjacent regions but also in latitudes far from the rainforest.

- Trees help to sequester carbon through photosynthesis, thus controlling the levels of carbon dioxide in the air.
- The boreal (subarctic) forest is a nearly continuous belt of coniferous trees extending across North America and Eurasia. Canada’s boreal forest is the largest intact forest in North America and the world’s largest terrestrial carbon storehouse.
- Urban forests cool cities, reduce energy use, reduce stormwater runoff, and improve air quality.

Nonviolent Action

In their efforts to bring political change to Kenya, Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement used nonviolence, a strategy that rejects the use of physical violence. Nonviolent techniques stand in contrast to armed struggle and have proven to be powerful tools in numerous movements for independence, government reform, and human rights. As a strategy for change, nonviolence is commonly associated with "people power." It involves the active withdrawal of citizens’ consent and cooperation with an incumbent regime. By removing their compliance — which is the source of political power — citizens undermine the power of rulers. Some examples of successful nonviolent campaigns are the struggle against British rule in India led by Mahatma Gandhi; the struggle for labor rights in Poland led by Lech Walesa and Solidarity; and the civil rights campaign in the U.S. led by Martin Luther King, Jr. More recently, the revolutionary wave of demonstrations in the Arab world in spring 2011 used techniques of nonviolent civil resistance in sustained campaigns involving strikes, demonstrations, marches, and rallies, as well as the use of social media to organize, communicate, and raise awareness in the face of state attempts at repression and internet censorship.

Tactics

Weapons of nonviolence, some of which were part of the Green Belt Movement’s arsenal, include the following:

- acts of protest, such as speeches, public meetings, marches, and street theater, which bring public attention to an issue
- noncooperation, such as strikes, boycotts, and civil disobedience, which are intended to halt or interfere with an industry, business, or political system
- nonviolent intervention, such as occupations, blockades, and hunger strikes

There are scores of nonviolent tactics in addition to those above. Among the keys to successful nonviolent action are strong leadership, focus on a single objective, and restraint of physical retaliation in the face of aggressive force. (See "Resources" for additional information.)
THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Think about a feature in the natural world that has special significance to you. How would you feel if it disappeared? What changes might result from its disappearance? What would you do if that natural feature were threatened?

2. What values do you associate with the natural world? Are these values necessarily at odds with modern commerce and development? Explain.

3. Do you think Kenya can recover from the cultural destruction caused by colonialism? Should people be encouraged to follow the traditions of their ancestors, even if they have to be retaught those traditions? Why or why not?

4. Is it possible for traditional cultural practices to exist alongside modern commerce and industry? Is it important that they coexist? Why?

5. How can developing countries contribute to the well-being—social, ecological, and economic—of developed countries?

6. How can developed nations contribute to the well-being—social, ecological, and economic—of developing nations? What can the average citizen do to promote sound, beneficial practices and policies toward other countries?

7. What parallels, if any, do you see between British colonial rule in Kenya and U.S. actions in Iraq and other parts of the world?

8. Wangari was a fighter for human rights and democracy. What kinds of weapons did she use?

9. Why were the mothers’ gathering at Freedom Corner in Uhuru Park and their hunger strike effective methods for achieving their objective, that is, getting their sons released from prison? How does the effectiveness of such nonviolent methods compare with the use of violence to achieve one’s goals?

10. What does the film’s title refer to?

11. What lessons do you take from seeing this film? How can those lessons be imparted to young people?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. “I Am the Hummingbird Campaign” is a Kenya-wide and international tree-planting campaign seeking to honor the memory of Wangari Maathai by doing that which she loved most: planting trees. As a testament to all that she stood and fought for, this initiative seeks to mobilize and bring together Kenyans and people around the globe from all walks of life to participate in an international tree-planting campaign to further the environmental causes that were closest to her heart. Their aim is to plant one billion trees with friends around the world in memory of Wangari Maathai and all she stood for. More information can be found at http://wangari.greenbeltmovement.org/hummingbird/


3. Organize a community tree-planting activity. Work with your local nature center or agricultural extension service to ensure appropriate selection of and care of the trees.

4. The Rainforest Action Network (RAN) sponsors several initiatives aimed at protecting the world’s forests. Visit their website, http://ran.org, to become informed on issues such as tropical ecosystems, destructive logging, and responsible forest management, and find out how you can participate in one of RAN’s initiatives.

5. The Green Coalition has numerous volunteer opportunities for individuals with a strong interest in environmental and social issues. Visit http://www.greencoalition.net to learn how you can put your skills to work promoting an environmental cause.

6. Environmental consciousness begins at home. Examine your own landscape and yard care practices. Plant trees and native plants appropriate to your region. Refrain from using chemical fertilizers that can run off into nearby waterways or leach into groundwater. Check the National Wildlife Federation’s website (http://www.nwf.org/backyard) for information on creating a backyard habitat.

7. Is there a social or political issue you feel passionate about? Make your voice heard! Write to your elected representatives and to local newspapers and other media. Learn how to organize your community to mount a larger effort to work for change (see “Resources”).

For additional outreach ideas, visit www.itvs.org, the website of the Independent Television Service. For local information, check the website of your PBS station.
RESOURCES

http://takingrootfilm.com/ – This is the filmmakers’ website for Taking Root. Mini-grants are available for screening events, tree-planting costs and other tree-positive initiatives. A downloadable 32-page "Action Guide" can be found in the "Take Action" section of the website.

http://www.katahdin.org/action/root/root.html – Katahdin Productions is working with Taking Root to make the film and resources available to community groups, schools, and the general public through events, a national broadcast, and grassroots initiatives.

Wangari Maathai and the GBM
http://greenbeltmovement.org – The official website of the Green Belt Movement contains information about the goals of the movement, information on its founder, and descriptions of the work it does in Kenya and internationally.

http://www.answers.com/topic/wangarimaathai – This website contains biographical information on Wangari Maathai, including her personal history.

Kenya
http://www.state.gov/p/af/ci/ke – This State Department website contains detailed information about Kenya.

http://crawfurd.dk/africa/kenya_timeline.htm – This is a time line of Kenya’s history from prehistoric times to 2004, when Wangari Maathai received the Nobel Peace Prize.

Trees and the Environment
http://www.fs.fed.us/ucf/treesforpeople.html – Trees for People, a U.S. Forest Service website, provides a comprehensive fact sheet about the benefits of urban forests.

http://www.isa-arbor.com/publicOutreach/treesAreGood/index.aspx – Sponsored by the International Society of Arboriculture, which maintains chapters nationwide as well as internationally, this website describes social, environmental, and economic benefits of trees and includes a comprehensive menu of tree care issues.

http://www.panda.org/index.cfm – The WWF’s (formerly known as the World Wildlife Fund) website contains a comprehensive section on forests, including information on types of forests and forest conservation efforts.

http://www.edf.org – The Environmental Defense Fund is a nonprofit organization that uses a multidisciplinary approach, working with business, government, and communities to solve critical environmental problems facing the planet. It welcomes the participation of citizens in its various environmental campaigns.

http://www.350.org – This is an international grassroots campaign that aims to mobilize a global climate movement united by a common call to action. “350” represents the parts per million carbon dioxide concentration that leading scientists have now set as an upper threshold for a safe climate.

http://www.1sky.org – This is an organization created in 2007 to focus the power of millions of concerned Americans on a single goal: bold federal action that can reverse global warming. In April 2011, 1sky officially merged with 350.org.

Organizing and Activism
http://www.commondreams.org – Common Dreams is a national nonprofit citizens’ organization working to bring progressive Americans together to promote progressive visions for America’s future, using the internet as a political organizing tool.

http://www.communitychange.org/ – The Center for Community Change strengthens, connects, and mobilizes grassroots groups to enhance their leadership, voice, and power by building the power and capacity of low-income people, especially low-income people of color, to have a significant impact on improving their communities and the policies and institutions that affect their lives.

http://www.aeinstein.org – This is the website of the Albert Einstein Institution, a nonprofit organization advancing the study and use of strategic nonviolent action in conflicts throughout the world.

http://www.peacemagazine.org/198.htm – This website lists 198 methods of nonviolent action, taken from The Methods of Nonviolent Action by political scientist Gene Sharp.

TAKING ROOT WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT LENS ON DECEMBER 5, 2012. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS.

Taking Root was produced by Lisa Merton and Alan Dater. The Emmy Award-winning series Independent Lens is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS Community is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS Community works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series Independent Lens to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities, and public television stations around key social issues and to create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS Community, visit www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved.