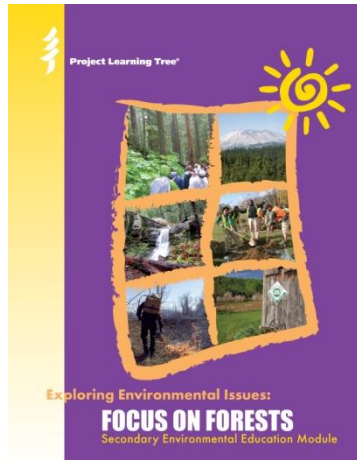


Wangari Maathai had many “words to live by.” She is an excellent person to focus on when using the PLT activity by the same name, Words to Live By.

The activity is included in the new high school module, [PLT’s Exploring Environmental Issues: Focus on](#)

[Forests](#), published in 2011. The module is available through attendance at a PLT professional development workshop. (Contact [your state coordinator](#) for information about workshops in your area.)



PLT’s Words to Live By activity follows the writings of different environmental writers over many time periods. In doing this activity, students express their own views about forests and explore different perspectives by reading excerpts from the writings of different authors.

This adaptation of the activity provides many “words to live by” from the life of the inspirational environmentalist Wangari Maathai.

Wangari passed away in September 2011. Current Kenyan President Mwai Kibaki presided over a state funeral in Nairobi, making her only the third Kenyan and the first woman to receive such an honor. The funeral procession made its way to Uhuru Park in downtown Nairobi, where she had stood years before protesting the possible destruction of the park and the building of a skyscraper in its place. The park has been renamed Freedom Corner. Wangari modeled her beliefs every day. For her final action, she requested a casket made of hyacinth, papyrus, and bamboo - she still wanted to preserve the trees.

Doing the Activity

1. Distribute a quote from Wangari Maathai to each student (see below). Have students read the quotes aloud, in order of how they appear. This will best represent a timeline for the events and changes in Wangari’s life. You will see the quotes are divided into three sections: **The Early Years and Education**, **The Years of Doing “Little Things”**, and **Nobel Laureate**. You can choose to use all quotes or smaller subsets.

2. After reading all quotes from **The Early Years and Education**, have students draw a picture of Wangari’s Kenya at the time she was a child, and then another picture that depicts the same space when she returned home from studying in the United States. Ask your students:

- How had the environment changed?
- What was the same?
- What did she do about it?
- What would you have done about it?
- Then, use the Internet to research images of this region of Kenya today. Do you think Wangari would be happy with how it looks today? Why or why not?

3. After reading all the quotes in the section **The Years of Doing “Little Things”**, ask students:

- Why did Wangari’s tree-planting initiatives work so well?
- What kind of tactics did she use to combat environmental issues?
- What is an environmental issue that the world (or your community) faces today? How can Wangari’s tactics be used to combat the issue?

4. After reading the quotes from **The Award: Nobel Peace Laureate**, ask students who Wangari accepts her award on behalf of and who she calls on at the end. Ask:

- If you were receiving the Nobel Peace prize, who would YOU accept it on behalf

of and who would YOU call upon in the end to ensure your work was a success?

- Was Wangari's work a success?
- Is there still work to be done on her behalf? Will you help? How?

5. After reading all quotes, have students discuss the following questions:

- How did events during Wangari's lifetime affect her view of forests and the environment?
- How did social issues of the time affect her thinking and actions?
- Compare her quotes to those of the other writers featured in the activity on the ["Tales of the Forest" student pages](#). What similarities and differences can you identify?
- Are there other writers today - or people in your life - who reflect some of the values that Wangari Maathai held? If so, who are they and what beliefs do they share with Wangari?

Wangari's Words to Live By

Use these quotes in discussing Wangari Maathai's life and how her views and activities changed over the course of her lifetime.

A. The Early Years and Education



"It was during the *mbura ya njahi* - the season of long rains, in 1940 that Wangari Maathai was born. The daughter of a peasant farmer and the third of

six children, she was delivered in her mud-walled home that had no electricity or running water. The location was a little village called Ithite - located in the hills of central Kenya. In her primary school years she was always attentive to nature and enjoyed playing in the abundant fig trees near her home. She loved listening to birds and would also help her mother collect firewood for the household. Wood and water were abundant in her community during her childhood. She would catch tadpoles in the stream. She also enjoyed gardening and working the fertile soil."

- From *Diminishing Resources: Forests* by Allen Stenstrup (Morgan Reynolds Publishing, 2010)

"We lived in a land abundant with shrubs, creepers, ferns and trees ... Because rain fell regularly and reliably, clean drinking water was everywhere. There were large, well-watered fields of maize, beans, wheat and vegetables. Hunger was virtually unknown."

- From "Planting the Future," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2007

"My school was typical for its time. It had walls of mud, a floor of earth, and a tin roof. Every Friday we had to bring ash from home and put it on the floor, go to a nearby stream to bring water, and pour it on the ash. Then we swept the floor, a common way of cleaning in those days that kept the dust from building up in the classroom and got rid of pests, like fleas."

- From *Unbowed: A Memoir* by Wangari Maathai (Borzoi Book, 2006), p. 41

"As a child, I used to visit the point where water bubbled up from the belly of the earth to form a stream. I imagine that very few people have been lucky enough to see the source of a river."

- From *Unbowed*, p. 45

"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.”

- From *Unbowed*, p. 71

“I enjoyed biology more than the chemistry I had focused on in high school, so biology became my major, and I minored in chemistry and German.”

- From *Unbowed*, p. 79

“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.”

- From *Unbowed*, p. 97

“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.”

- From *Unbowed*, p. 119

“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 had been covered by trees, bushes, and grasses when I was growing up had been replaced by tea and coffee.”

- From *Unbowed*, p. 121

“By then I understood the connection between the tree and water, so it did not surprise me that when the fig tree was cut down, the stream where I had played with the tadpoles had dried up. I profoundly appreciated the wisdom of my people, and how generations of women had passed on to their daughters the cultural tradition of leaving the fig trees in place. I was expected to pass it on to my children, too.”

- From *Unbowed*, p. 122

“Now, it is one thing to understand the issues. It is quite another to do something about them. But I have always been interested in finding solutions....It just came to me: ‘Why not plant trees?’”

- From *Unbowed*, p. 125

“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.”

- From *Unbowed*, p. 138

B. The Years of Doing “Little Things”



“When I first started, it was really an innocent response to the needs of women in rural areas. When we started planting trees to meet their needs, there was nothing beyond that. I did not see all the issues that I have to come to deal with.”

- From an interview with Wangari Maathai, *Mother Jones* magazine, January 5, 2005

“It’s a matter of life and death for this country. The Kenyan forests are facing extinction and it is a man-made problem.”

- Quoted on SearchQuotes.com
(www.searchquotes.com)

"Anybody can dig a hole and plant a tree. But make sure it survives. You have to nurture it, you have to water it, you have to keep at it until it becomes rooted so it can take care of itself. There are so many enemies of trees."

- From the article "This Much I Know," *The Observer Magazine*, June 8, 2008

"After the women had planted seedlings on their farms, I suggested that they go to surrounding areas and convince others to plant trees. This was a breakthrough, because it was now communities empowering one another for their own needs and benefit."

- From *Unbowed*, p. 137

"For me, one of the major reasons to move beyond just the planting of trees was that I have tendency to look at the causes of a problem. We often preoccupy ourselves with the symptoms, whereas if we went to the root cause of the problems, we would be able to overcome the problems once and for all."

- From an interview with Wangari Maathai, *Mother Jones* magazine, January 5, 2005

"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."

- From *Unbowed*

"I have seen rivers that were brown with silt become clean-flowing again ... The job is hardly over, but it no longer seems impossible."

- From the article "Planting the Future," *The Guardian*, February 16, 2007

"You must not deal only with the symptoms. You have to get to the root causes by promoting environmental rehabilitation and empowering people to do things for themselves. What is done for the people without involving them cannot be sustained."

- Quoted in "Seeds of Hope in Africa," *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2005

"We need to promote development that does not destroy our environment."

- Quoted in [Nobel Women's Initiative](#)

"We owe it to ourselves and to the next generation to conserve the environment so that we can bequeath our children a sustainable world that benefits all."

- Quoted in "[Farewell Wangari Maathai](#)," *The Guardian*, September 26, 2011

"The generation that destroys the environment is not the generation that pays the price. That is the problem."

- From [Wangari Maathai Quotes](#)

"We cannot tire or give up. We owe it to the present and future generations of all species to rise up and walk!"

- From [Wangari Maathai Quotes](#)

"You cannot protect the environment unless you empower people, you inform them, and you help them understand that these resources are their own, that they must protect them."

- From [Wangari Maathai Quotes](#)

"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."

- From [Wangari Maathai Quotes](#)

“I’m very conscious of the fact that you can’t do it alone. It’s teamwork. When you do it alone, you run the risk that when you are no longer there nobody else will do it.”

- From *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* by Wangari Maathai (Lantern Books, first published 1985), p. 138

C. The Award: Nobel Peace Laureate



Quotes below are from Wangari Maathai’s Nobel Lecture, Oslo, December 10, 2004

“I stand before you and the world humbled by this recognition and uplifted by the honour of being the 2004 Nobel Peace Laureate. As the first African woman to receive this prize, I accept it on behalf of the people of Kenya and Africa, and indeed the world. I am especially mindful of women and the girl child. I hope it will encourage them to raise their voices and take more space for leadership.”

“In this year’s prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has placed the critical issue of environment and its linkage to democracy and peace before the world. For their visionary action, I am profoundly grateful. Recognizing that

sustainable development, democracy and peace are indivisible is an idea whose time has come.”

“My inspiration partly comes from my childhood experiences and observations of Nature in rural Kenya. It has been influenced and nurtured by the formal education I was privileged to receive in Kenya, the United States and Germany. As I was growing up, I witnessed forests being cleared and replaced by commercial plantations, which destroyed local biodiversity and the capacity of the forests to conserve water.”

“In 1977, when we started the Green Belt Movement, I was partly responding to needs identified by rural women, namely lack of firewood, clean drinking water, balanced diets, shelter and income.”

“Throughout Africa, women are the primary caretakers, holding significant responsibility for tilling the land and feeding their families. As a result, they are often the first to become aware of environmental damage as resources become scarce and incapable of sustaining their families.”

“Tree planting became a natural choice to address some of the initial basic needs identified by women. Also, tree planting is simple, attainable and guarantees quick, successful results within a reasonable amount time. This sustains interest and commitment.”

“[W]e have planted over 30 million trees that provide fuel, food, shelter, and income to support their children’s education and household needs. The activity also creates employment and improves soils and watersheds. Through their involvement, women gain some degree of power over their lives, especially their social and economic position and relevance in the family.”

“In time, the tree also became a symbol for peace and conflict resolution, especially during ethnic conflicts in Kenya when the Green Belt Movement used peace trees to reconcile disputing communities.”

“It is 30 years since we started this work. Activities that devastate the environment and societies continue unabated. Today we are faced with a challenge that calls for a shift in our thinking, so that humanity stops threatening its life-support system.”

“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.”

“Those of us who have been privileged to receive education, skills, and experiences and even power must be role models for the next generation of leadership.”

“I would like to call on young people to commit themselves to activities that contribute toward achieving their long-term dreams. They have the energy and creativity to shape a sustainable future. To the young people I say, you are a gift to your communities and indeed the world. You are our hope and our future.”

“As I conclude I reflect on my childhood experience when I would visit a stream next to our home to fetch water for my mother. I would drink water straight from the stream.... Later, I saw thousands of tadpoles: black, energetic and wriggling through the clear water against the background of the brown earth. This is the world I inherited from my parents.”

“Today, over 50 years later, the stream has dried up, women walk long distances for water, which is not always clean, and children will never know what they have lost. The challenge is to restore the home of the tadpoles and give back to our children a world of beauty and wonder.”

Resources

- [The Green Belt Movement](#)
The official site of the Green Belt

Movement and its founder, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai.

- ["Planting the Future,"](#) *The Guardian*, February 16, 2007
- ["This Much I Know,"](#) *The Observer* magazine, June 8, 2008
- Maathai, Wangari. 2006. *Unbowed*. New York: Knopf
In this memoir, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai recounts her life as a political activist, feminist, and environmentalist.
- Stenstrup, Allen. 2009. *Forests (Diminishing Resources)*. Morgan Reynolds Publishing
How can we manage the earth's forests in sustainable ways? This book explores the ecology of forests, the social impact of forests, and what our global community is doing to protect this vital resource.

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- Photo #4 - Kenya, October 2004. Photo by Mia MacDonald, courtesy of The Green Belt Movement
- Photo #5 - Receiving news of the Nobel Peace Prize award, Kenya, 2004. Photo by United Nations Environment Programme, courtesy of The Green Belt Movement

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