

Wangari Maathai: Marching with Trees by On Being

What follows is the transcript of an On Being interview between Krista Tippett and Wangari Maathai.

Krista Tippett, host: It's delightful to see the late, remarkable Wangari Maathai inspiring a new generation of girls through the popular Rebel Girls book series. I'll never forget the day I interviewed her. She'd won the Nobel Peace Prize two years earlier — the first African woman to do so, and a biologist. She'd flown from Kenya to an event in Minnesota, and we felt so privileged to have an hour with her. But we ended up spending three hours together in her hotel room, stranded by snow. Her personal presence, her visceral power and radiance, were extraordinary. It was not hard to imagine that this woman had fought off a violent despot and encroaching desert by planting tens of millions of trees. She saw early what many are just beginning to grasp: that ecology is increasingly a matter of war and peace and human flourishing.

[music: "Seven League Boots" by Zoë Keating]

Wangari Maathai: They wanted to clear-cut this forest and put up residential houses. And I said, "Are you out of your mind? You need this forest." So we would take trees and march with our seedlings towards the forest and say we are marching to go and plant trees. Now, we were essentially saying, you're not going to clear-cut this forest because this forest is needed by the city.

Ms. Tippett: And did you win that battle?

Ms. Maathai: After many years we won, which is great. And that little forest is still there, thank God

Ms. Tippett: I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being.

Wangari Maathai, who died in 2011 at the age of 71, was the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a PhD. She founded the Green Belt Movement to create designated areas of park, farm, and uncultivated land around communities. Across two decades, she was at times beaten and imprisoned as she battled powerful economic forces and Kenya's tyrannical ruler, Daniel arap Moi. Wangari Maathai was born under British colonial occupation and schooled by Catholic missionaries. But when she looked back on her childhood near the end of her life, she realized that her family's Kikuyu culture had imparted her with an intuitive sense of environmental balance.

Ms. Tippett: I'd like for you to tell me something about where you were born, about your family upbringing, including the spiritual aspect of that.

Ms. Maathai: I was born in rural areas of Kenya, in the central highlands. My community is

the Kikuyu. And one of the things that I may have inherited without being conscious about it, because my people were already Christians by the time I was growing up, is the fact that my people were very close to nature.

I like to give a story, for example, that reflects that: that when I was a young child, I used to collect the firewood for my mother. I remember my mother telling me not to collect any firewood from this tree called a fig tree, the so-called strangler fig tree. And when I asked her why not, she told me, "That is a tree of God. We don't cut it. We don't burn it. We don't use it. They live for as long as they can, and they fall on their own when they are too old."

Now, I didn't think much about that until much, much later. Indeed, when I became environmentally conscious, I remembered that story. I also recognized that in the period of, maybe, between 1920s to 1960s, a lot of those fig trees had actually been cut, because, having become Christians, the missionaries were very eager to get rid of all these trees that reminded the natives of a god that they did not relate to, because they needed to relate to another god, and this new god was a god who was worshipped in a house called church. But the god they were relating to prior to that was a god that they worshipped under these trees, such as that fig tree. Not every one of them, but they definitely were among the sacred trees.

Ms. Tippet: And what did your mother mean? What was it about the fig tree? Was there more explanation to that, about what it was about it that was holy or of God?

Ms. Maathai: Well, the point I want to emphasize here is, these trees, because they are so huge and because they were never cut, they actually provided stabilization of the land, because these are highlands. They protected these people from landslides.

Ms. Tippet: Physically, they protected people.

Ms. Maathai: Yeah, physically they protected people.

Ms. Tippet: There's nothing mystical about this.

Ms. Maathai: Yes, precisely. They physically protected the land from sliding because it's so steep. And because they have roots that go very deep, and, as I say, because they are not cut, they last forever. They are able to go down into the underground rock. They are able to break the rock, and they are able to bring some of the subterranean water system up nearer to the surface, and so they were responsible for many of the streams that dotted the landscape. So in many ways, therefore, they were part of the water system in the area, and so they served a very important purpose. Of course, nobody quite recognized that until now, maybe. People are beginning to see, well, where are these trees, because we do get a lot of landslides now, by the way.

Ms. Tippet: So there's a really pragmatic component to that religious teaching.

Ms. Maathai: Yes. And sometimes in religion, whether it is Christian, Buddhism, or Judaism, we have these teachings we read in the Bible. The Bible tells you to do this. It doesn't tell you why, but sometimes it's because there is some coded wisdom ...

Ms. Tippet: Human wisdom, right.

Ms. Maathai: Human wisdom that people have accumulated in the course of generations.

Sometimes it becomes a ritual; sometimes it becomes a cultural practice; sometimes it's associated with a festival. But when you look into many of these activities that people did before they were influenced by a foreign culture, there was always a very good reason why they did it. It was very much part of their way of having learned how to live within the environment in which they found themselves.

Ms. Tippet: So you were very much influenced by this Kikuyu culture and this closeness to nature, but you were raised Catholic. And what was the Catholic influence on your thinking about what we now discuss as "the environment"?

Ms. Maathai: Well, I think that I would say that the Christian faith has not done enough to recognize its role as a custodian of the environment and that, in many ways, Christianity has almost facilitated exploitation of the resources, without a conscious effort such as we are trying to encourage now that whatever we do, we must remember, we have a limited amount of resources. Perhaps in those days, and especially as missionaries and explorers and settlers moved into new grounds, perhaps it really did look to them like their resources were unlimited. But in the past, therefore, I would say that the Christian faith — and I can only talk about the Christian faith, because that's my heritage — has not really played the role of a custodian, such as now you hear theologians emphasizing that you really should be.

Ms. Tippet: Right. I think there's an awakening about that within Christianity.

Ms. Maathai: Absolutely. I guess that's what we should call it, is an awakening. It's a good awakening. I don't really think I remember very much of religious teaching of how to take care of the environment. I studied biology, so I think that it was more out of the science and the understanding of the ecological systems and the observations I made in my country — especially the damage that seemed to be happening between the time I left my country in 1960, came to the United States for five and a half years, then went back. In that period, my country had become independent. It had introduced new ways of commercial agriculture. It had introduced cash crops, and these were now growing in the areas where there used to be wood lots. Levees, which used to be nice and clean, were no longer clean. They were full of silt. So these observations for me aroused an interest that there must be something that is happening that is bad, but it wasn't the faith. And I wish it was, because it should have been. I should have been reading the book of Genesis a little more closely.

Ms. Tippet: Right. So clearly, there was a huge change in your country between those years that you left and came back. And when I think about those years, the early '60s in the United States, it was clearly a really dramatic period here as well — not a very environmentally conscious period in this culture. Although, the civil rights movement was going on then. How did that time in the States flow into the perspective you took back to Kenya?

Ms. Maathai: Yeah. Now, I want to say that sometimes things happen around in your life, and you're not consciously absorbing them, and you're not consciously asking yourself, now, what am I learning out of all this?

But, indeed, what you are observing, what you are reading, what you are seeing influences you, sometimes in your subconscious, and I'm quite sure that the civil rights movement in the United States in the '60s greatly influenced my sense of justice, my sense of the need to respect human rights, my sense of respecting the rule of law, which later on became very useful when, I accidentally, I would say, became an activist for

human rights issues, for women's rights issues. And there was no effort for me to do that. And I'm quite sure that if I had not come to America at that time, I would probably not have made human rights issues an issue. It would probably not have struck me that somebody else's rights were being violated.

Ms. Tippet:Really?

Ms. Maathai:Yeah, sometimes, you are a product of the society in which you grow. And quite often it takes a special kind of mind to break away from the norm, to know or to believe that what everybody's accepting as the norm is not right, and to question it — and to almost have people say, "What's wrong with you? Everybody else thinks this is all right. Why do you think it's wrong?" I think that it is sometimes because you have escaped that society, and you have gone to another place, and you have seen your challenges.

Ms. Tippet:Your vision has changed. You've been opened up.

Ms. Maathai:Your vision has changed. Your perception has changed. Your consciousness has changed. And so you come, and you tell people, "Now, how can you accept that?" And they want to say, "What?"

Ms. Tippet:Right, right, because you suddenly see it.

Ms. Maathai:Yeah, you suddenly see it, and you see it so clearly, so you're passionate about it, and sometimes people here don't understand what burns you.

Ms. Tippet:You know, it's so true. I was reading about the work you're doing — I mean, a tree is a simple thing, right? But when you talk about the observations you started to make in listening, initially, it sounds like, in the '70s to women in Africa, and you started to suddenly see this simple equation between trees and having to walk far for water and soil erosion and lack of work and lack of fodder for animals and malnutrition, and you wonder how that simple equation had broken apart. I suppose that's a very common human paradox, but ...

Ms. Maathai:Yeah, I think that is so true. One of the things that happens — and this happens to us whether it is because we are going through a colonial experience like we were, or you're going through an industrial experience like many people would experience in a country like America and other industrialized countries. What happens is that you slowly moved from the world you knew, and you move into another world, and most of the times, you move into a world that you believe is better. That's why we are told this is development.

Ms. Tippet:Right, progress.

Ms. Maathai:This is progress. We accept it. And it takes us some time to realize, "Wait a minute." Maybe it was not all good progress. Some aspects of it is not quite all right, and you begin to see how things have become disconnected. And now the challenge is to see, how can you connect them again? How can you make people see the linkages?

Ms. Tippet:That, in fact, are organic.

Ms. Maathai:Yeah.

["African Oasis II" by Sweet Honey in the Rock]

Ms. Tippett:I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, one of my favorite interviews ever, from deep in our archive, with the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai. The first African woman to hold that honor and a biologist, she was prescient about the links becoming clearer all the time between ecology and human flourishing. She founded the Green Belt Movement in 1977, while she was the first female department chair ever at the University of Nairobi.

Ms. Tippett:So how did you start planting trees?

Ms. Maathai:Well, in the University of Nairobi, there were very few women. There were actually — there were originally two of us and then three. We were being very badly treated because the university had never dealt with women academic members of staff, so they didn't have terms of service. But one thing they knew is that we should not enjoy the same terms of service as men. But they didn't know how to draft our terms of service.

But before they got there, we were complaining like mad that we should not be discriminated against, and as part of this campaign, I joined the National Council of Women to represent the Association of University Women. Now, you'll remember, in 1975, the first United Nations Women's Conference was in Mexico, and I found myself in a forum where Kenyan women were discussing the agenda that we should take to Mexico. And I came in. I had my own agenda about the discrimination of women at the University of Nairobi.

But when I got there, then I listened to what the rural women were talking about. And it was the rural women's story that actually struck me, and I completely forgot my story because, for me, by comparison, I was complaining about minutia — by comparison to what these women were really asking for. They were asking for water. They were asking for food, nutritious food. They were asking for energy, which was mainly firewood. And they were saying they have no income.

When I listened to what they were saying, it so happened that many of these women also came from the highlands, in the same highlands where I grew up. And it struck me that in that period of less than 10 years, so much change had taken place in the environment — that water was no longer clean, yet when I was a child, I would go to the river, and I fetch water for my mother. I would come home. We would drink it. We didn't even boil it. And there was no firewood, and as a child, I was collecting firewood for my mother in the wood lots, but all these wood lots had been cleared to make way for tea and coffee. And because of the new commercial agriculture and because of clearing the bushes, now there was massive soil erosion and leaching of agrichemicals into the water. So the water was no longer clean.

And that's why, in my acceptance speech, I talked about the fact that in this ...

Ms. Tippett:For the Nobel Prize?

Ms. Maathai:Yeah, for the Nobel Prize. You remember, I mentioned that I was shocked by the fact that the stream where I used to play as a child with tadpoles dried up, and the fig tree that my mother had talked about had been cut to make way for tea. And so I told the women, "Now, you know what I think? We should plant trees."

Ms. Tippett:You started with seven trees. Is that right?

Ms. Maathai:I planted seven trees. Five died, two survived.

Ms. Tippet:In downtown Nairobi.

Ms. Maathai:In downtown Nairobi. And the two are still alive, which is fantastic. But the important thing for me was to see the linkage, and that's what I try to encourage people to do. If you're going to do anything for the environment, you have to see what has been disconnected.

Ms. Tippet:It really strikes me how important it was, that proximity that you had to that land, and also that you saw what a short period of time it had taken for such destruction to happen. But maybe that also empowered you to think that taking some simple steps could, as you say, reconnect what had been disconnected.

Ms. Maathai:Yes, yes. Because I immediately could see that if you planted trees, you'd protect the soil from soil erosion. You'd provide the firewood for the women. If they planted fruit trees, they can supplement their diets. The trees grow very fast, so they can easily sell these trees and make an income. So I quickly saw how the tree could solve the problems.

Ms. Tippet:I think that part of your story is so important, because when people are presented, I think especially, with these great ecological disasters or impending disasters — it's the same thing with political problems — it seems so enormous that an individual person wonders what they could possibly do. But your story is actually one of looking at what you knew, what you were close to, and seeing what had gone wrong and seeing, in a very basic way, what you could do to move it back right.

Ms. Maathai:Absolutely. And I really think that that's part of what the Norwegian Nobel Committee saw, was the simplicity but also the complexity. The fact that here's something that is being done by individuals at the grassroots level, but it also gradually had the capacity to get to the decision-makers and make the decision-makers sit up either to stop you or to control you, because they felt like you were threatening them.

Ms. Tippet:And that two trees that live can become 30 million trees, which is pretty remarkable.

Ms. Maathai:Yeah, indeed, because of the mobilization. But I would say, since we are talking about the faith, that to a very large extent, if I had, perhaps, not gone to school in a Catholic school, in a school that was run, managed, by sisters, by nuns — at a time when missionaries were really very serious about values — they were very concerned about values and especially the value of service — I think I would probably have turned out to be a different kind of a person. Because for me, as I said earlier, sometimes people don't have to tell you, "This is what you need to believe in, and this is the value you need to embrace." You just observe. And when people ask me, "Who are the people who inspired you?" — these are some of the people who actually inspired me, these nuns, that these, at the time, beautiful women, young women — and I remember thinking, now, why did they leave their country to come here? Why didn't they get married and have families? And, of course, the answer was because they wanted to serve Jesus. They even wore rings, because they told us they were married, spiritually, to Jesus.

I really couldn't see what is the benefit. We are so used to doing things because we benefit. There is something — we always want to know, why are you doing that? Because there must be something you're going to get. When you look at nuns like that, what do

they get out of that?

Ms. Tippet: And isn't that an interesting way, also, to think about — you and I were talking earlier about how the Christian church in general, Christian theology, has really not paid attention to the environment. In fact, has interpreted some of the stories and teachings that are in there in a way that has been destructive to the environment, and people are waking up to that. But that's an interesting way to think of that, how even traditions which have something to correct can look to other virtues, right? And besides just the teaching on the environment, this virtue of service that is there and has been very strong.

Ms. Maathai: Yes. And that virtue is really what we are calling upon to take care of the environment, because we are saying we want to protect the environment — not so that we can use and not for our own purpose. We want to protect biodiversity — not so that we can use these forms of life, because some of them we don't even know they're there — but it is to say that you're not doing it because of something beneficial that you're going to get, something tangible. And that's a very important experience, especially today, because even in my own country, I find that every time you want to tell people, "Do this, it is good to do it," people want to say, "What do I get out of it?" Now, of course, for the nuns, they will tell you, "I'll go to Heaven." Well, OK, fine, but ...

Ms. Tippet: That's a real long-term goal.

Ms. Maathai: [laughs] It's a long-term goal, and we are still here on Earth, and the fact that that they are that committed — and even some of these people who tell me, "What am I going to get out of it?" They too, they will tell me, very loudly, that they want to go to heaven.

Ms. Tippet: I actually wanted to ask you about, let's say, those first women who you had this conversation with, you paid attention to what their needs were, and then you planted these trees. I wanted to know what effect that had on them, on these women, in their lives.

Ms. Maathai: One of those women, actually, that I like to remember, was a woman called Priscilla Mereka. She came from the Presbyterian women.

Ms. Tippet: Was she a rural resident, also?

Ms. Maathai: Yeah, she was a Kenyan, and she was representing the women's guild in the National Council of Women. So she's one of those women who reasoned, who were presenting. And later on, when I said, "Why don't we plant trees?" — and we formed a small committee within the National Council of Women. She became a member of that committee, and we worked together for many years.

Unfortunately, she died some years ago, maybe about 10 years ago now. But by the time she died, she had completely transformed her landscape so very much that when they were putting her remains to rest, everybody in the community was praising her not only for the work that she had done in the church but the fact that she had brought the Green Belt Movement into her area, that she had facilitated and encouraged the planting of, literally, millions of trees, and that — one thing that I remember women saying is that, you know, how you always see these women carrying their firewood on their back, and there is a typical rope that they use, usually made out of animal hide. And the women said at her funeral that you never see any woman today with that rope because it's not necessary. No women need to carry firewood because the firewood is at the household.

And that, I thought, was such a legacy for her.

[music: "Cuica" by Emancipator & 9 Theory]

Ms. Tippet:After a short break, more with Wangari Maathai. You can always listen again and hear the unedited version of every show we do on the On Being podcast feed — wherever podcasts are found.

I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today from the archives, the voice of the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai. She's featured in the popular Rebel Girls book series and is inspiring a new generation. Her early wisdom about the links between ecological balance and every other kind of human balance is so resonant to the world we inhabit now. A biologist by training, she was a celebrated environmentalist and activist for global democracy. She served for a time as the assistant Kenyan minister of the environment.

When it awarded her the Nobel Peace Prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee said this: "When we analyze local conflicts, we tend to focus on their ethnic and religious aspects, but it is often the underlying ecological circumstances that bring the more readily visible factors to the flash point." The committee noted that in places as diverse as the Sudan, the Philippines, Mexico, Haiti, and the Himalayas, deforestation, encroaching desert, and soil erosion are among the root causes of civil unrest and war.

Ms. Tippet:I would really love to hear what your definition is of sustainability. I'd like to hear it in your voice and in your vocabulary.

Ms. Maathai:Well, I can assure you that there are very many people who don't know what that word really means.

Ms. Tippet:Well, that's right, and that's — so how would you define it?

Ms. Maathai:And different people have different explanations. But for me, the way I understand it is that you're using resources in a way that you ensure that you can use those resources for a long time. Even if you take that word literally, you can sustain yourself with those resources for a very long time.

Now, take it beyond yourself and, say, your nation, your region, globally, we can sustain ourselves for a very long time. Now, a long time means not only our generation but the future generations. And the future generations can be between here and eternity because when we know how long this planet is going to last. And so, we want to do whatever it takes to ensure that we do not eliminate ourselves from this planet by exploiting the resources that we need, because, for example, we know that we cannot live on this planet if we don't have green life because green life is the only life that is able to trap the sun energy and give us food and clean the air we breathe. So we know, therefore, that we must maintain the green life on this planet and that if we were to desertify this planet and remove every green vegetation, we would be dead before the last tree dies.

Ms. Tippet:So, it is a matter of life and death.

Ms. Maathai:It is a matter of life and death, absolutely.

Ms. Tippet:And I think you know that — you talk about conflict, how it's not just life that's threatened. It's not just whether people can eat. It's peace itself that is threatened by a

scarcity of resources.

I think that in the United States, there's been a period of time — as you said, those British colonists, when they first came to Africa, it was “unlimited resources.” And I think Americans have had what we now recognize as a false sense of unlimited resources. They were either here or we could buy them. This is simplified, but — and yet, I think, with so many things that are happening in the world, with the fact that so many of these resources are, in fact, running out, with climate change — I think people here are coming back to a sense that you've had all along, that this is not just about life and death; it's also the difference between peace and war.

Ms. Maathai: Absolutely, and even that peace is almost like life and death, because when we do not have peace, we could easily get into a conflict and a war. And of course, when we are there, we kill each other. So, it's a matter of life and death, indeed. But it is extremely important and especially for people who live in highly industrialized and rich countries, because people who live in such countries have a feeling that even if they don't have resources within their borders, they can get them from wherever those resources are. But even if you can buy those resources, even there, there is a limit to what extent you can get those resources and not create a conflict. Because remember, the resources that are left behind, people have to fight over them. And because the world is now so interconnected that conflict anywhere in the world, sometimes they come right into your living room, either through television, if there is conflict somewhere, we are very quick to say we need peacekeeping forces; and these peacekeeping forces are quite often soldiers from areas where there is peace. So suddenly you realize you may be in peace, but it is your son or your husband who now has to go and try to keep peace where peace has been threatened. So it becomes really an important issue for all of us, whether we are rich or we are poor.

Recently, I was in Japan. I was very lucky because I came across a word called mottainai, which is a Japanese Buddhist concept that is entrenched in the Japanese culture, which encourages people not to waste resources. And this was especially true, they told me ...

Ms. Tippet: It's a spiritual concept.

Ms. Maathai: Yeah, it's a spiritual concept. And in fact, this aspect was brought out to me by a monk. I think his name is Monk Mori from Kyoto temple. We went in, and he had heard me use that word publicly, and he said, I'm so happy you're using that word mottainai, because it is a word that Japanese don't use anymore because they feel embarrassed to say don't waste resources, because they have so much — or receive resources with gratitude, receive what you get from the Mother Earth with gratitude or from nature with gratitude. We usually don't think about that. We don't usually thank nature for giving us what she does.

And he reminded me of the Christian concept of let us be custodians of the environment, of the resources, rather than of ...

Ms. Tippet: “Stewardship” is a good Christian word.

Ms. Maathai: Yeah, the stewardship. I'm very happy that theologians now are really more and more encouraging us to think of ourselves as custodians, stewards, rather than domineering masters, you know. So this, coming from a country like Japan, is very, very ...

Ms. Tippet: It's very interesting.

Ms. Maathai:It's very interesting, and it's very, very good. And I was very happy that, because it was their word, when I started using it, they said, "Oh, this is so wonderful." I said, "Yeah." And especially, because in the industrialized countries like America you have the technology, you have the capital, you have the skills, you can actually use a lot of resources that, instead of wasting them, you can recycle them using the technology, and you can therefore help to save how much of the resources that are being used in the world. But see, if you become wasteful, if you are not grateful, if you don't recycle — because why should you recycle when you can buy more — you must always remember: But there are billions out there who don't have enough even to survive, let alone to decide whether they should reduce or reuse.

Ms. Tippett:It's hard for people to — for those billions to seem real, to influence little tiny decisions that are made in the course of daily life about whether to recycle something.

Ms. Maathai:Precisely. They look distant because quite often we don't see their faces except when they are dying and their faces are brought to the television in our living rooms. And then we are very quick to call our representatives and tell them, "Do something about these people who are dying in this corner of the world." But it's happening all the time.

[music: "Cinquante Six" by Ali Farka Touré]

Ms. Tippett:I'm Krista Tippett, and this is On Being. Today, my archival conversation with the late Nobel Peace Prize laureate Wangari Maathai. The former Kenyan ruler Daniel arap Moi publicly called her a madwoman. She was arrested and beaten for protesting illegal logging and land grabbing — and once for leading an historic march of women demanding the release of their sons from Daniel arap Moi's political prisons.

Ms. Tippett:So much of your work has been with women, and you write a lot about the balance of power between men and women. And I wanted to ask if you think of that, the balance of power between men and women, also as a sustainability issue?

Ms. Maathai:The truth of the matter is we are all resources anyway. We are a human resource. And the biggest problem that we have had, especially in the women's movement, is trying to convince the other half that we are a very important resource and we do make great contributions, and therefore we should be respected, we should be appreciated, our work should be quantified, we should be compensated, and that we should not be taken for granted. Now, unfortunately, 30 years ago, in 1975, as I said earlier, when we were meeting to go to Mexico, we were going there because we wanted to ...

Ms. Tippett:For the United Nations Women's Conference, the first one.

Ms. Maathai:... Women's Conference, the very first one. And it was at that conference that we declared the women decade. Obviously we have made great strides, and we should be very, very proud of the strides we have made. But it is true that women are still a very unappreciated resource in many societies. I can see how quickly women, even very competent women, are sacrificed on the altar of political convenience.

Ms. Tippett:That's a strong sentence. Over these years, it's not all been happy ceremonies planting trees. I know you've been scorned and you've been pursued and you've been beaten. You've stood up to powerful forces. And you didn't know, when all this started,

that it would become so large, that you would found this great movement, that you would win the Nobel Peace Prize. What kept you going? What were the resources you drew on in the hardest times?

Ms. Maathai: Now, again, I would probably say that that is where the experience and the being molded by people of faith made a lot of difference — that although I was not professing my faith, I'm quite sure that I was grounded in that moral fiber of wanting to do the right thing. I was so sure that this was the right thing because I could see. It was quite obvious. And even those who were persecuting me knew, and I knew they knew.

Ms. Tippet: Knew that you were doing the right thing?

Ms. Maathai: Yeah, they knew I was doing the right thing, but they didn't want me to do it because it was inconveniencing them. And I knew that, the fact that people have a right to clean drinking water. So anybody who is there polluting that water knows he is doing the wrong thing, knows he should not do it. Anybody who is interfering with the catchment areas where these levees come from so that some levees start drying up, he knows he's doing the wrong thing. And because he's doing it to enrich himself, and he is enriching himself with resources that have been entrusted to him by the public, and he knows the public don't know, and if they know they are too afraid to challenge him. So me, when I challenge, he can afford to intimidate, he can afford to ridicule, because I'm alone. But I somehow — I had that conviction that I'm right, and he knows it.

Ms. Tippet: Now, it sounds to me like you always assumed that there was a morality, a conscience somewhere, even inside the people who were — or an ability to see what you saw about what was right.

Ms. Maathai: It was too obvious for people not to see.

Ms. Tippet: Yeah, but it would also have been possible for you to just write these people off, to fight them, to declare them evil. Do you know what I'm saying?

Ms. Maathai: But I didn't have the power to do anything to them. They had the power. That's why they could arrest me; they could take me to jail; they could ridicule me publicly. They had the power. I didn't have the power. I couldn't do anything. So the only thing I had, the option I had was to work with these ordinary people and try to teach them. Initially, I didn't do any teaching. But gradually, when I saw that people were being taken advantage of because they were ignorant, I started reading the Bible, the book of Hosea ...

Ms. Tippet: Reading the prophets?

Ms. Maathai: Yeah, the prophet. I wanted to know, what did the prophets do when these things happened? And I read about the book of Hosea. Sometimes it's fascinating to read about these old Bible stories and see — and sometimes the stories you read, they are almost replicated in the world we live in. So I read, for example, the book of Hosea quite often, and it talks about this prophet who is sent to the people of Israel to tell them they will perish because they are so ignorant. And he said, you're ignorant and even the priests are ignorant, and you are not listening to the instructions of the Lord, and so you will perish.

So I saw literally that our people were perishing because they were ignorant. They didn't understand the linkages between the problems they were facing and the environmental

degradation that was happening right there below their feet.

Ms. Tippett: It's an interesting model too, because what the prophets were doing, what you were doing in a sense is railing against your own people for their sake.

Ms. Maathai: Yeah, telling them that — open your eyes and see that what we are doing is very, very important. Don't be intimidated; don't be persuaded by these people who are in power, because whatever they are doing, they're doing it against your good and the good of your children. So at least plant trees, for goodness sake. And by planting trees you are not harming anybody. You're not harming them. But I knew that they didn't like what I was doing.

Ms. Tippett: It's kind of an ecological form of civil disobedience, planting trees.

Ms. Maathai: It was, in fact. It was, indeed. And, indeed, it became a symbol of our defiance every time. For example, we wanted to protect our forests that the people in power were privatizing. For example, I remember we had a big fight over a forest called Karura, which is close to the — it is actually within Nairobi, and it is actually essentially the land of Nairobi, the equivalent of Central Park in New York. They wanted to clear-cut this forest and put up residential houses. And I said, "Are you out of your mind? You need this forest." And they said, "We don't need the forest; we need houses." Now, you tell me.

So we would take trees and march with our seedlings towards the forest and say we are marching to go and plant trees. Now, ordinarily nobody should be bothered about a bunch of women trying to plant a tree, but because we are marching towards this forest, we were essentially saying, you're not going to clear-cut this forest. You're not going to put any residential houses in this forest, because this forest is needed by the city.

Ms. Tippett: And did you win that battle?

Ms. Maathai: After many years we won, which is great. And that little forest is still there, thank God.

[music: "Brrrlak!" by Zap Mama]

Ms. Tippett: We started out talking about growing up, and within your culture trees were holy places, or they created holy places. You had a Catholic upbringing, and then you read the Prophet Hosea when you were fighting some of your darkest battles.

I want to ask you about your image of God. How do you think about — that's a hard — I don't usually ask people a direct question like that, but I'd be really curious about your response to it. What does your work with trees, all the work you've done, the battles you've fought, and, in your new awareness of the importance of democratic spaces, how does all of that flow into your understanding of these big religious questions?

Ms. Maathai: When I was in a Catholic school in Nyeri, which is where I was doing my primary education, I was actually being taught by sisters of the Consolata Order, Order of the Consolata, who come from Milan, by the way. Their founder recently became beatified, by the way, so they're on the right track. At that time, I must say that religion was extremely superficial in the way that God was presented to us, because God was presented to us in the way he appears in the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo. So at that time it was, I would say, a very superficial presentation of God, almost like a human person. And with the mind of a young person, you almost felt like, yeah, God is

somewhere in Rome or somewhere in the sky, in the clouds. And then, of course, you remember, my own background. I was already removed from my own background, because my parents had already converted into Christianity.

Ms. Tippett: From Kikuyu culture.

Ms. Maathai: Yes. But there was always that influence of, for example, the fact that they believed that God lived on Mount Kenya, and they had a great reverence to Mount Kenya. And so in the course of my environmentalism, I have often visited those two concepts of the way my ancestors presented God to me and the missionaries presented God to me.

Ms. Tippett: So, the Sistine Chapel or Mount Kenya.

Ms. Maathai: Yeah. Now, where is God? And I tell myself, of course, now we are in a completely new era when we are learning to find God not in a place but rather in ourselves, in each other, in nature. In many ways it's a contradiction because the church teaches you that God is omnipresent. Now, if he is omnipresent, he is in Rome, but he can also be in Kenya at the same time, if he is omnipresent.

So I have had this transformation for me of who God is. I still believe strongly that there is that power. His shape, his size, his color, I have no idea. But you are influenced by what you hear, what you see. But I still — when I look on Mount Kenya, it is so magnificent, it is so overpowering. It is so important in sustaining life in my area that sometimes I say, yes, God is on this mountain.

Ms. Tippett: Thank you so much, Wangari Maathai.

Ms. Maathai: Most welcome.

[music: "Elyne Road" by Toumani Diabate]

Ms. Tippett: As we finished this conversation, Wangari Maathai sang me a song from Green Belt Movement.

Ms. Maathai: This kind of song would be very appropriate, because when we are moving, we always want it to be peaceful. So singing religious songs was a very common thing. It says there is no God like him. There is no love like his. And there is no strength like his.

[Wangari Maathai singing in Swahili]

Ms. Tippett: Wangari Maathai founded the global Green Belt Movement, which has contributed today to the planting of over 52 million trees. She was the 2004 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. She died of cancer on September 25th, 2011 at the age of 71. Her books include a memoir, *Unbowed*, and *Replenishing the Earth: Spiritual Values for Healing Ourselves and the World*. She's also one of the 100 heroic women featured in the book *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*.

[music: "Still Young" by Evenings]

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Ms. Tippet: The On Being Project is located on Dakota Land. Our lovely theme music is provided and composed by Zoë Keating. And the last voice that you hear singing at the end of our show is Cameron Kinghorn.

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