

TAKING ROOT: The Vision of Wangari Maathai
A Film by Lisa Merton & Alan Dater, Co-Directors/Producers

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

Lisa Merton and Alan Dater

We first met Wangari Maathai in the spring of 2002 at The Yale School of Forestry. We were at once captivated and inspired by Wangari. We grasped immediately that her vision for change and her methods for change were at one and the same time interknit in a dynamic that showed its power and effectiveness in the doing rather than in political talking and ideology. She had the moral courage to speak truth to power and the patience, persistence and commitment to take action - against enormous odds.

In Wangari's story, we could see an evolutionary path that linked seemingly disparate realms. As her story unfolded, it became clear that each step she had taken could not have been taken without the ones before. Her path was a blueprint of her developing understanding, and hence, our understanding, of the nature of holistic change and the inextricable linkages between a healthy environment and healthy communities, good governance and peace. We were compelled to tell her story. It was timely.

Wangari was a cinematographer's dream. She was charismatic, humorous, a consummate storyteller. At the time of the first interview, Kenya was still under the administration of Daniel arap Moi, a man who had attacked Wangari personally, put her life at risk, and was in the process of destroying their country. Yet she held no bitterness toward this man, no hatred was expressed. Despite her amazing courage, she was humble. She had a delight in life and a positive outlook that filled her with a luminous presence.

It was not only what Wangari had accomplished that was stunning, it was also the way she had done it. She had had a way of choosing the right issue at the right time and not letting anything or anybody get in her way. Her story was organic; her rural roots connected her deeply to the earth, and despite her education and years in academia, she had never lost that connection.

When she left 15 years in academia, she reconnected with the rural women with whom she had grown up. In looking at their problems stemming from a degraded environment, Wangari was starting at the grassroots. These women were the caretakers of their families, and it was because their lives had become so difficult that she took notice. It made her problems in academia seem trivial by comparison.

One element of Wangari's and the Green Belt Movement's 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 neo-colonialism, but the women themselves and civil society as a whole had also been a casualty. The way people survive on the land they live on is an integral part of how their culture is shaped over time and when that balance is upset, the results are devastating. The loss of land, the loss of culture, and the fear had rendered people 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 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 realized, 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 peoples' dignity and their connection to themselves and to their environment. By taking action to improve 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 improve their circumstances. Thus, they are changing the mechanism of oppression and passing on a different story to their children. This story has further instilled in us a sense of awareness and passion to critically dissect oppressive structures and fight for a more just world.

It is our hope that **TAKING ROOT** engages, inspires and moves you to take actions that further environmental, social and economic justice, for they are inextricably linked.