



ONE WOMAN'S STRUGGLE

A Reflection of Servant-Leadership

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Kenya is a free democracy now. The British colonizers left Kenya in 1963 but they left a land devastated both in terms of a ruined ecosystem and an uprooted culture (Kemble, 2003, p. 206). In terms of an ecosystem, Kenya was reduced to a mere shell of its former self. Kenyan land had been deforested and its fertility exhausted by the colonial masters (Kenyatta, 1989; Maathai, 2006, pp. 3–8). Wangari Maathai, upon seeing the devastation, decided to do what she could to combat environmental and poverty issues arising from deforestation (“Wangari Muta Maathai,” n.d., para. 2). Because of her, some thirty million trees have been planted and much of Kenya’s ruined land has been reclaimed. In recognition of her efforts she received the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize (Maathai, 2004, pp. ix–x).

How was it possible for an individual, and for that matter a woman, to bring forth such a level of leadership against such formidable odds? I attempt to answer this question herein, reflecting on Maathai’s living servant-leadership attributes and the theoretical statements those attributes represent. Before answering the question raised above, it is important that I place my reader into the perspective of what the terms *leadership* and *servant-leadership* mean in the context of this paper. Next, I will present a historical background of the environmental problems in Kenya. Finally, I will provide an account of how Maathai implicitly used her servant-leadership qualities to resolve the problem.

THE NATURE OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

The concept of leadership is elusive in terms of definition due to various factors that include culture, institutions, social influence, diverse processes and evolution of different societies, and so on (Wren, 1995, p. 38). According



to Northouse (2004, p. 2) there are almost as many different definitions of leadership as there are people who have tried to define it. Despite the elusiveness of the term, I find Northouse's description of the term quite fair. His claim is that four components are central to the phenomenon of leadership. These are process, influence, group, and goal (2004).

Leadership in Northouse's (2004) view may be defined as a process. This means that leadership is not necessarily a trait or characteristic that resides in the leader, but a transactional event that occurs between the leader and his or her followers. Process implies that the leader and the follower affect each other and that leadership is a shared responsibility among all involved. Leadership may also be defined in terms of influence that takes place between the leader and the followers. It is important to note that both leaders and followers are necessary for leadership to occur. Lack of one of the two components renders leadership unnecessary (Burns, 1978) by virtue of their being like two sides of the same coin (Rost, 1991). Leadership is actually a relationship between two partners; one who leads and the other who is led (Jassy, 2001). Leadership is also regarded as a reality that occurs among a group of individuals with a common goal. It involves directing a group of individuals toward accomplishing some task or end.

The notion of servant-leadership was formulated by Robert Greenleaf (Greenleaf Centre for Servant-Leadership, 2007) in the 1970s. It is a service-oriented leadership theory based on the idea that genuine leadership is founded on a deep desire to serve others (Greenleaf, 2002). In Greenleaf's notion one chooses to serve first and to lead as a secondary priority. The legitimate power involved in servant-leadership is not a power that dominates or controls, but that which heals, restores, and reconciles. The servant-leader in this regard submits to subtle forces of life that lead away from self-embeddedness and toward the kind of transcendence that is capable of leading and healing the self and beloved others (Ferch, 2005, p. 4). Servant-leadership involves a positive transformation through personal sacrifice, example, and selfless dedication of other people's lives whose priorities stand out as paramount and preeminent.

Greenleaf (2002) believes that servant-leadership emerges from within a person as a natural state of being. Covey echoes similar understanding when he says that for a person to be defined as a servant-leader, specific aspects of that person's being must be present. Covey (2004) describes these characteristics as involving the whole person; mind, body, heart, and spirit (p. 21). In other words, to talk about a servant-leader is to talk about the



identity of the whole person. The best test, and difficult to administer in respect to servant-leadership, is:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? What is the effect of the least privileged in the society? Will they benefit or at least be further deprived? (Wren, 1995, p. 22)

According to Greenleaf (2007), servant-leaders become leaders through their inner desire to live a life of service. Servant-leaders manifest the desire to ensure that other people's needs are served before their own. Spears (2004) claims that clear manifestations of servant-leadership are evident in the lives of people like Jesus, Martin Luther King Junior, Gandhi, and Mother Teresa. Spears believed that the leadership portrayed in these personalities was not motivated by the traditional power-driven and self-centered interests' approach but by the desire to serve others' needs.

While there are several paths to becoming a servant-leader, community building is vital (Lad & Luechaer, 1998). Through service and volunteer work within community, discovery and contribution can be realized. It is through such leadership of oneself as "separate self" that change to one of self embedded in community occurs (p. 59).

Spears (2002) identifies essential characteristics of servant-leadership. He says that while the said qualities may be found in many types of leadership, they are simply emphasized more strongly by servant-leaders. Spears claims that servant-leaders tend to see themselves as equal with and not above those led. They see others as peers to teach and learn from. They understand and speak the language of their followers. Servant-leaders encourage others to do what they do well without dictating to them.

Servant-leaders use leadership to obtain the general good and not a personal end. Listening is innate to this type of a leader and caring is a part of who they are. They start where people are but don't stop there. They help others reach their full potential as they explore new horizons. Servant-leaders inspire others to service and the realization that they cannot do it alone. So they work with and for others. They inspire others to be servants by their own desire to serve. Honesty, awareness, empathy, passion, ability to overcome obstacles, sense of joyfulness, optimism, and flexibility are some of the essential components of the personality of a servant-leader. Spears (2004) concludes by likening a servant-leader to a sage. For him a servant-leader is a sage who stays below others in order to be above; who, wishing to



be before them, stays behind them. Having defined and described leadership and servant-leadership, I now turn to giving a historical background of the deforestation and general degradation of the environment in Kenya.

THE LEADERSHIP CHALLENGES WANGARI MAATHAI FACED

Before the coming of the Europeans, Kenya's agricultural regions comprised an abundance of shrubs, creepers, ferns, and indigenous trees (Maathai, 2004, pp. 3–8; Gaily, 1970, p. 210). Some of the indigenous trees produced fruit while others provided shade, firewood, and fodder for animals. The trees also produced protection against soil erosion. The humus from the trees acted as a fertilizer to revitalize soil. Local people didn't need artificial fertilizer to grow healthy crops. Above all, trees formed forests that attracted regular rainfall.

It is important to note that Kenya is an equatorial country and is located on the east coast of Africa. It has an area of about 225,000 square miles. It has a wide range of geographical and ecological regions ranging from the tropical coastal plains on the Indian Ocean to the glaciers of Mount Kenya. More than 70 percent of the land is considered arid, receiving fewer than twenty inches of rain per year. Only 7 percent of the country is suitable for agricultural production, and that is concentrated in the central and western highlands of the Rift Valley, where 85 percent of the population and most economic enterprises are concentrated (Banks, Muller, & Overstreet, 2007, p. 648; Kemble, 2003). Kenya enjoys international fame as one of the African countries with the most attractive artifacts of cultural heritage, wildlife, and natural scenic attractions.

Before the coming of the colonial period, Kenya's local peoples' religious beliefs and cultural values about the importance of natural forests led them to protect the forests rather than destroy them (Kenyatta, 1989). For example, Mount Kenya, originally known as Kirinyaga, or place of brightness, the second-highest peak in Africa, was a sacred place of worship. Everything good was believed to come from it. Abundant rains, rivers, streams, clean water, medicinal tree roots, game for meat, firewood for fuel, building material, and such were seen as originating from there. People literally believed that God dwelt on top of this mountain (Hansen & Twaddle, 1995). The natural forest surrounding this mountain, and indeed, any other natural forests within Kenya, were viewed as God's lodges as she toured the land.



Because rain fell regularly, reliably clean drinking water was easily available for the people and their animals. Soil was rich and produced abundant food. Indigenous crops such as bananas, peas, arrowroots, assortment of green vegetables, sweet potatoes, millet, sorghum, assortment of indigenous beans, pumpkins, and various fruits were produced abundantly whenever they were planted. Domestic animals such as indigenous cows, sheep, goats, flourished. As long as rain fell regularly, people were assured of sustenance. Since there was enough for everybody, a major cause of war, lack of food, was allayed (Maathai, 2004).

Then came the European colonialists in 1800, and a little later, the missionaries. With them came their worldview. The Europeans' aims of occupying African land were to explore for the sake of political and material benefit (Harris, 1979, p. 148; Ochieng & Ogot, 1995). In order to gain root in Africa without much resistance, the Europeans started by colonizing the African mind (Mazrui, 1986, pp. 11–21; Rodney, 1982, p. 76). Ani (1995) expresses this idea of colonial manipulation well when he says, "If you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. When you determine what a man shall think, you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do" (p. 429). The Europeans worked on replacing the local cultural values, political ideologies, religious beliefs, economic structures, educational systems, and medical health systems with their own (Kenyatta, 1989, p. 269). In time, the entire political and economic structure had been removed from the local population, and came to be in the hands of the Europeans (Gupta, 1998).

In Kenya the British authorities allowed the European migrants to take over the ownership of Kenyan land. The indigenous people were simply kicked off and often became paupers. For example, "[T]he Kikuyu took to migrant labor following the alienation of their land by European settlers in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Those who stayed put either became 'squatters' or remained confined to economically unviable pieces of land" (Kenyatta, 1989, p. 26).

The new settlers replaced native crops with various foreign crops such as wheat, maize, coffee, tea, and indigenous wildlife with exotic livestock (Ela, 2001, pp. 87–89; Maathai, 2006). McWilliams (1976) stated that it was in the field of agriculture that the European politico-economic dominance was most strongly marked. He further claimed that by 1960 there had been created a substantial plantation sector of tropical export crops (sisal, coffee, and tea) covering more than 350,000 acres and, more remarkably, a mixed



farming sector of cereals, livestock, and other crops in which over a million acres were brought under active cultivation together with more than two million acres of paddocked natural grazing land (p. 257).

By the early 1950s about forty thousand settlers, most of them British, had moved onto about 2,500 farms, in a region that later came to be known as the white highlands. It is to be noted that at that time only the foreign settlers were allowed to grow cash crops. These cash crops included tea, coffee, cotton, pyrethrum, and exotic trees. The elimination of indigenous trees for cash crop use offered an engine of economic growth but threatened to displace both native species and rural inhabitants (Clapp, 1995).

In time, a railway line was put in place to enable easy transportation of raw material from the mainland to the coast, where the same material would then be shipped to Europe. Its construction needed a lot of iron and timber. That meant planting more exotic trees, further squeezing out the local varieties, to provide quick timber.

As the local crops were being replaced with exotic ones, following the dynamic described by Clapp (1995), so were the local foods. For example, breakfast meal comprising millet porridge was replaced with tea. Clothes of animal skin were replaced by cotton ones. This made it necessary for the introduction of cotton growing. A nearly complete transformation of the local culture into one akin to that of Europe had taken place. The economy was monetized, and that served as a final nail in the coffin of a previously thriving culture. Kenya was no longer Kenya.

Upon the exit of the British in 1963 many Kenyan people expected that the new local government would help its people retrace and reclaim some of their traditional values that had been weakened or replaced by the European ones. But this dream was never to be (Maathai, 2006, p. 125). Greed for money and other wealth commodities had invaded the local people's minds. Those that became leaders used the system to enrich themselves and their next of kin. Government-owned natural resources were used in whatever way possible for money making just as in the time of colonialists. Neither the political leadership nor the citizens were keen on restoration of the environment. Local people planted coffee, tea, cotton, pyrethrum, and exotic trees for money making. Indigenous animals were completely discarded and replaced with exotic, cash-producing ones. Interference with the natural interplay of living things led to some unforeseen long-term side effects (Harris, 1979, p. 148; Warren, 1997).

Deforestation for the sake of introducing plantations for various export crops had major negative effects with regard to shortage of rainfall.



Deforestation affected the pattern of seasons. It became harder by day to anticipate rain. Though this effect may not be self-evident, ecologist Gupta (1998) explains,

The global and long-term effects [of deforestation] are not clearly understood yet, but certain consequences are feared. The loss of the forest decreases the moisture in the soil and, if large-scale, is also expected to lead to a reduction in the rainfall of the region. Together, these would lead to changes in the flow patterns of local rivers. The surface of the deforested land reflects a greater amount of solar energy back to the atmosphere. (p. 13)

Reduced rain led to reduced production of food crops and fodder for animals. At times there were longer spells of dry seasons than usual. Maathai (2006) later observed that many local farmers had converted practically all their land into growing coffee and tea to sell in the international markets. These cash crops occupied the land previously used to grow food crops. As a consequence, families had now turned to feeding on processed foods such as white bread, maize, flour, and white rice, all of which were high in carbohydrates but relatively low in vitamins, proteins, and minerals (Maathai, 2006, p. 123). On the other hand, introduction of artificial fertilizers, insecticides, pesticides, and various processing industries (of coffee, timber, cotton, sisal, tea, and pyrethrum) caused air pollution and soil degradation. Lack of adequate forestation affected the natural equilibrium where nature creates and nourishes itself.

Although the local people, and especially women, given the advantage they had as a result of regular direct contact with the soil as they tended crops (Warren, 1997), in time were remotely aware that something needed to be done to alleviate the problem, none took any significant step toward the change required. But there arose a single person, a woman, who believed she knew a single and practical solution to the many problems bedeviling Kenyan people: degraded land, poverty, warring tribes, shortage of nutritious food, clean water, and firewood. Maathai initiated the famous Green Belt Movement (GBM) in Kenya, which would be a vehicle for dealing with the environmental issues facing the country.

MAATHAI'S LEADERSHIP

Wangari Muta Maathai is both a local and international celebrity after fighting a winning battle against all elements of environmental degradation in Kenya for the past thirty-five years. The environmental concerns she fights



for are the totality of the ecological and social conditions of our being. Her spirit of optimism and unbowed attitude in the midst of challenges prove to be handy tools in her life as a leader (Maathai, 2006).

Having been born in Nyeri, Kenya (Africa), in 1940, Maathai's humble beginnings as a rural Kikuyu girl, from which she rose to attain the highest level of academic achievement, is an inspiration to any young woman who might need some encouragement in overcoming cultural obstacles to realize her career dream. Maathai hails from a heavily patriarchal society that demeans education for girls. When still pursuing her elementary schooling, some of her neighbors would tell her mother, "There is no need to keep her in school. She cannot even become a clerk; she is a girl after all" (Maathai, 2006, p. 72). But as it turned out, Maathai was not distracted by such discouragements. She was the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctoral degree (2006). She obtained a bachelor's degree in biological sciences in 1964, after which she attained a master of science degree in 1966. In 1971, she obtained a PhD from the University of Nairobi, where she also taught veterinary anatomy. She became chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and an associate professor in 1976 and 1977 respectively. In both cases she was the first woman in Kenya to hold such positions. It was while still holding those positions that she received her insight of beginning a tree-planting campaign in Kenya that later came to be known as the Green Belt Movement (GBM). But why tree planting?

Back in 1975, Kenyan women came together under the auspices of the National Council of Women in Kenya (NCWK) to express what they regarded as issues of much concern to them as women. NCWK was/is a movement founded in 1964 to serve as an umbrella organization to unify various women's groups both large and small throughout Kenya with a membership drawn from urban and rural areas (Maathai, 2006, p. 122).

Maathai, who was already an executive member of NCWK, received her tree-planting insight after listening to the issues the rural women raised at the 1975 NCWK annual conference. Among other things, the women said their families were suffering from malnutrition and were traveling long distances in search of firewood and water. They said their families suffered water-related diseases because the available water was not only insufficient but also too polluted for human and animal consumption. The women's hope was that the leaders of NCWK would help them in one way or other to seek a quick solution to the problem. Concerns mentioned above are certainly what the World Health Organization (WHO) alludes to when it says that



85 percent of sickness and disease in countries in the southern hemisphere is attributable to inadequate water and that as many as twenty-five million deaths a year are due to water-related illnesses (Warren, 1997, p. 7).

As Maathai listened to the women, she got an insight that the root cause of all their problems was the deforestation that had been occurring on the land for a long time. So she embarked on a tree-planting program in 1977 (Pal, 2005) that would later be named the Green Belt Movement (GBM). Being the pragmatic woman that she is, Maathai integrated her education with her observation to come up with a practical solution to women's plight. These characteristics are implicit as Maathai narrates in her memoir how the tree-planting project was born:

I focused on what could be done. As it turned out, the idea that sprang from my roots merged with other sources of knowledge and action to form a confluence that grew bigger than I would ever have imagined. (Maathai, 2006, p. 119)

In her view, tree planting was such a simple and practical idea that, if implemented, it would solve all the problems that existed. The trees would provide a supply of wood for fuel and construction work, supply shade for humans and animals, protect watersheds and bind the soil, and, if they were fruit trees, provide food. They would also heal the land by bringing back birds and small animals and regenerate the vitality of the earth.

Paths Set for Tree Planting

Having such a conviction that her idea was viable, she used the NCWK as a vehicle for implementation. Being the visionary leader that she was, Maathai decided to plant not only trees, but also ideas. In her opinion, incorporating educative seminars in the tree planting venture would empower local people with an understanding of the importance of a healthy environment. Maathai (2006) hoped that this same knowledge would eventually lead people to take personal responsibility in tree planting (p. 174). Wangari identified and incorporated into the tree-planting project relevant issues such as environmental education, civic education, human rights, gender, and power, among others.

In June 1977, the GBM, which was initially known as, Save the Land Harambee, marked its first tree-planting campaign by planting its first green belt, consisting of seven trees in one of the capital city parks. From then on,



the movement embarked on establishing a green belt in every locality with an aim to promote the movement among locals. The planting exercise was either preceded or concluded by educational seminars.

By late 1977, news of the tree planting had spread throughout the nation and soon farmers, schools, and churches were eager to set up their own programs. That was the beginning of communities themselves taking ownership of the movement's initiatives. Maathai's (2006) work comprised organizing ideas, instructing people, and even doing the actual tree planting with the people (p. 133).

OBSTACLES ON THE WAY

With the exercise now taking root and expanding day by day, Maathai was required to spend more and more of her time on the project. It became difficult for her to retain her teaching job in the university and to fully concentrate on the tree-planting exercise. After some discernment she quit her teaching position and dedicated herself fully to the nonprofit tree-planting exercise (Maathai, 2006). The other challenging part for Maathai was how to raise the money required for the exercise. At its initial stage Maathai relied on her own funds to buy seedlings and distribute them all over the country (p. 128). The cost of educational tours and developing tree nurseries and distributing them all over the country was becoming overwhelming. Maathai and her team had to initiate new ways of meeting these demands. As concerned availability of seedlings, Maathai sought help from government's chief conservator of forests.

She requested that the trained foresters give seminars to women on how to run their own nurseries. The trained foresters were reluctant to share the knowledge, claiming that they couldn't understand why Maathai was trying to teach rural women how to plant trees. According to the foresters, "You need a professional; people with diplomas to plant trees" (p. 135). To this, Maathai said, "I learned that professionals can make simple things complicated" (p. 135). According to Maathai, "[A]ll the women needed to know was how to put the seedling in the soil and help it grow. Anybody can dig a hole, put tree in it, water it, and nurture it" (p. 135). Since these women were farmers experienced in growing all sorts of crops, Maathai encouraged them to "use your woman sense because tree seedlings are very much like the seeds you deal with; beans and maize...put them in the soil. If they are good they will germinate. If they are not they won't survive" (p. 136).



With this encouragement from their mentor and facilitator, women gained self-confidence and seized the opportunity to use their informal technological knowhow, and before long women proved incredibly resourceful. Tree nurseries sprang up on farms and public land around the country. Maathai (2006) proudly says, “These were our ‘foresters without diplomas’” (p. 136). With sufficient seedlings, the tree planting exercise intensified. The other contribution that increased the tree-planting exercise was the introduction of environmental and civic education carried out by GBM. With this education, women knew the importance of the tree-planting exercise and did it from their hearts rather than doing it to please their mentor.

Maathai encouraged women to move on their own with their already acquired knowledge to their neighboring regions convincing others of the importance of tree planting. To this, Maathai (2006) says, “This was a breakthrough because it was now communities empowering one another for their own benefit” (p. 137). In this way, step by step, the process replicated itself several thousand times. As the local communities intensified their efforts, more and more green belts were established. It was due to the inspiration received from these belts that the movement at last changed its name from Save the Land Harambee to the now-famous Green Belt Movement.

To date, more than thirty million trees have been planted in Kenya under the umbrella of the Green Belt Movement. More than thirty thousand women have been trained in forestry, food processing, beekeeping, and other trades that help them earn income while preserving their lands and resources (Maathai, 2006). Ecotourism and just economic development have been incorporated into the movement’s objective. In recognition of her contribution to sustainable development, democracy, and peace, Maathai became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Prize in 2004. In her acceptance of the prize speech, Maathai said, “The thirty million trees planted by the movement volunteers, mostly rural women, are testament to individuals’ ability to change the course of environmental history. Working together, we have proved that sustainable development is possible. I hope this realization will encourage women to raise their voices and take more space for leadership” (Maathai, 2004; Pal, 2005).

MANIFESTATIONS OF SERVANT-LEADERSHIP IN MAATHAI

By dedicating her life and energy to environmental restoration and conservation activities for the sake of eliminating poverty among the local people of Kenya, Maathai expresses the servant-leadership characteristics



that Greenleaf describes when he says that the legitimate power involved in servant-leadership is not a power that dominates or controls but that which heals, restores, and reconciles (Greenleaf, 2002). For Maathai to have left the socially and economically dignified professor position at the University of Nairobi to dedicate her time and energy to the Greenbelt Movement is a sure sign of servant-leadership. By making this move Maathai portrays the characteristic of servant-leadership that Spears (1998) certainly alludes to when he describes servant-leadership as a reality involving a positive transformation through personal sacrifice, example, and selfless dedication of other people's lives whose priorities stand out as paramount and preeminent.

By volunteering her life to the service of the Kenyan people through environmental preservation, Maathai manifests the characteristic of servant-leadership as described by Greenleaf. For Greenleaf (2002), a servant-leader is one whose deep desire is to ensure that other people's needs are served before his or her own (p. 29). By choosing to share her time and knowledge with the local community for their good is to have chosen the best path to servant-leadership, according to Lad and Luechaer (1998). For Lad and Luechaer (1998), service and volunteer work within one's community is the surest path to becoming a servant-leader. To have sacrificed her socially dignified status as a university professor to become a "forester," Maathai proves that what inspired and motivated her in the tree-planting project were not a search for greatness and power, but a deep desire to be a servant of others. For the tree-planting insight to occur and be implemented not only required a scientific and intuitive mind (Gordon, 1996), but also a person embodying servant-leader characteristics. In Maathai, the identified servant-leadership characteristics are present. Some of these are a deep and prompt desire to serve, intelligence, passion, optimism, flexibility, a listening and caring attitude, acceptance, valuing others' contributions, and a deep capacity to discern, perceive, and intuit. Above all, Maathai has proved her servant-leadership qualities by scoring excellently in the servant-leadership test. According to Wren (1995), the best test, and difficult to administer in respect to servant leadership, is:

Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? What is the effect of the least privileged in the society? Will they benefit or at least be further deprived? (p. 22)

For Maathai, the answer to the above question would certainly be a firm yes. She would support her answer by listing what the GBM has achieved so far.



The main mission for GBM has been to raise community consciousness on self-determination, equity, improved livelihood security, and environmental conservation, using trees as an entry point. The movement has helped small-scale farmers become agro-foresters through expert technology transfer, while public awareness has been broadened to understand the relationship between population, food production, and energy. The movement has literally reduced poverty and improved the self-esteem of the Kenyan people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Muchiri, is a renowned educator and social justice activist in Kenya. Her work on helping women become servant-leaders who transcend cultural and interpersonal difficulties and chaos in order to bring healing to others is an important part of Kenyan development and contributes to a deeper understanding of community and culture throughout the world.

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