



A Tree Grows in Kenya ©2006
The Wangari Maathai Story

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Performed by: Common Ground

Characters

Grandmother Constance
Granddaughter Faith
Young Wangari
Grandmother Maathai
Adult Wangari
UN Representative/Nobel Prize Presenter
Wangari's Husband
President Moi
Police Officer/Head Thug
Female Voting Official
Chorus (Women, Thugs)

Scene 1: The Family Farm, 2006

(Grandmother Constance is busy planting trees at stage right. Granddaughter Faith enters the scene from stage left. She runs around her grandmother excitedly, motioning for the old woman to join her...)

Faith: Bibi, Bibi! Come watch me play a game of cati with my friends!

Grandmother Constance: Maybe later, little Faith, but right now I am working on something very important.

Faith: But why can't you come? What are you doing that's more important than playing!?

Grandmother Constance: Come over here and I'll show you. (Faith walks over to her Bibi to look) Today I am planting a tree for Kenya. I am placing this seed into the ground. Soon it will sprout into a sapling. Over time, with water, sunshine and my care, it will grow into a big, tall tree.

Faith: But what does planting a tree have to do with Kenya?

Grandmother Constance: That's a very good question. In fact, a little girl just like you asked her Bibi the same question nearly 60 years ago. The answer would mark a new chapter in Kenya's history. Come sit with me, Faith, and I'll tell you the story.
(Faith sits down next to her grandmother. They turn their backs to the audience and shift to the side of the stage.)

Scene 2: The Maathai Farm, 1946

(As Constance begins to explain the story, young WM and her grandmother enter stage left. They are focused on a fig tree on the family property. Grandmother Maathai is tending to the fig tree by breaking up soil and watering it).

Wangari: Good morning, Bibi.

Grandmother Maathai: Good morning, Wangari.

Wangari: You sure do love your tree, Bibi. But why do you pay so much attention to this one?

Grandmother Maathai: Well, Wangari. This is a fig tree, which is very sacred to our people. It helps keep our land beautiful by carrying water from the river through its roots to share with smaller plants and bushes. It is our duty as Kenyans to protect this special fig tree and make sure that future generations do the same.

Wangari: Wow, Bibi. This tree is very important. What can I do to help?

Grandmother Maathai: Keep tending to this tree. Always remember that the land, the trees, the animals and the people are all connected. By giving your love to one living thing, it spreads to other living things.

Scene 3: The Family Farm, 2006

(Constance continues to narrate stage right)

Grandmother Constance: Little Wangari went off to school when she was seven years old, but she never forgot what her bibi told her about the fig tree. Even as she passed through primary school and high school, the love of her family's land stayed fresh in her mind. At her convent school, she excelled in the sciences and graduated near the top of her class. Her dedication to learning was enough to win her a Kennedy Scholarship to study in America.

Faith: America?

Grandmother Constance: Yes, the USA! She earned her Masters Degree in Biology. That's the study of living things, like the fig tree that she and her grandmother loved so much. Later, after she came home to Kenya, she went on to become the first woman in East Africa to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Nairobi in biological sciences.

Faith: Wangari must have been a smart woman! But didn't she ever miss her family and her farm?

Grandmother Constance: Of course she did. That's why after getting her degree in America, she headed straight home to visit the people and places she loved in Kenya.

Scene 4: Nyeri Region, near Mount Kenya, circa 1970

(WM enters from the back of the room and walks towards stage left. The smile on her face quickly disappears as she looks around. The trees in Kenya have been cut down, the streams have dried up and women in the village are walking, heads down, searching for wood unsuccessfully. They crisscross that stage in a steady stream, not paying any attention to Wangari's presence.)

WM (calling out to various women): What has happened to our beautiful town? Where are all the trees? Is this the same river in which I used to fish for tadpoles?
(The women ignore her. WM comes to the center of the stage where the fig tree is placed, it's now dead).

WM (tears streaming down her face, she grabs the hand of the woman walking by): What's happened to my grandmother's fig tree?
(The woman tries to walk away, but WM pulls her back)

WM: Please, I beg of you, explain to me what's happened to this land. It once was green. Now it's brown. It once was filled with tall trees. Now they're dead. It once had a clean, flowing river. Now it's dried up.

Woman 1: We used to be able to find firewood by our homes. But all the trees have been cut down. We have to walk for hours and hours to find a single piece of wood. Our children are left alone while we search.

Woman 2: The land was stripped. Fertilizer was poured on the ground to grow cash crops. But the rain washed away the dirt and fertilizer, making the river dirty and brown. There is no longer clean water to drink. My family is thirsty.

Woman 3: I, too, have no clean water to drink. With no trees left, the sun is drying up the soil. The dry soil will not allow crops to grow. I don't have enough food to feed my family. We are hungry.

Woman 4: The government is to blame. They should be providing us with water!

Woman 5: The trees are gone because my neighbors keep cutting too many of them. (Pointing to woman #3) I saw you cut the last tree!

Woman 6: But your husband poisoned the soil with fertilizer. Now there is no clean drinking water left.
(The group of women argues amongst each other, pointing fingers and placing blame)

WM: Women, women! Your fighting will solve nothing. It will not help the trees to grow. It will not bring clean water. It will not grow food. We must all work together to find a solution and fix the problem before it's too late.

Woman 7: But what can we do to help? The problem is too big and I am so tired.

WM: My grandmother once told me taking care of one small fig tree can help because all living things are connected. Every one of us is capable of planting a tree. Anyone can dig a hole, put in a seedling and nurture it. When you plant a tree, you feel connected to the earth and have a stake in its survival. Here, take these seeds and start planting them near your homes, on your farms and in the community. Share the seeds with your neighbors and encourage them to do their part to bring life back to our land.

Chorus: We can do this! Let's start now!

(WM hands the group seeds and all the women gather around to start planting. More and more women enter the stage to join in until it's full of women planting.)

Scene 5: Nairobi, Kenya, 1981
(Constance continues to narrate)

Grandmother Constance: At first, the movement started small. The women planted in whatever containers they could find, including old tin cans and broken cups. Just as these first few plants began to sprout and flourish, so did the movement. In 1981, their first big victory was to capture the attention of the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

UN Representative: Of Behalf of the United Nations, we'd like to present you and the women of the Green Belt Movement with this large sum of money to purchase more seeds for planting. This funding will transform your efforts from a few tree nurseries to a large number with thousands of seedlings.

WM: Thank you so much. Due to your support, we'll be able to mobilize thousands of women across Kenya to begin planting more trees in their own communities. These foresters without diplomas are essential to the survival of the movement as well as Kenya as a nation.

Scene 6: Various Kenyan towns and cities, circa 1983

(The planting gets underway across various parts of the stage. Women work alone and in small groups, helping and praising each other's efforts)

Grandmother Constance: Wangari was right. The Green Belt Movement started spreading like a brushfire across the country—but not everyone was in support of these women taking action.

Wangari's Husband: My wife should be at home cooking my dinner, not running around until all hours and taking other women away from their husbands. Wangari is too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn and too hard to control. We must divorce immediately.

Police Officer: Wangari's actions are inappropriate. She shouldn't be encouraging groups of women to meet. Plus, it's against the law to meet with more than nine people without a license.

President Moi: Wangari is a threat to the order and security of the country. She is a madwoman who speaks out too much and must be stopped!

Woman 8: I know Wangari is trying to help, but how can she expect us to go against our husbands and the government? I'm too afraid to join her movement.

Grandmother Constance: Despite her opponents, Wangari felt in her heart that she was doing the right thing. These challenges only fueled her passion and commitment to continue promoting the Green Belt Movement and fighting for what she believed in.

Scene 7: Karura Forest, 1999

(WM and group of women go to protest the deforestation of an area for a luxury housing project. They gather near the front gate, bags of seeds and spades in hand.)

WM: Women, friends, we are here today to defend a national treasure and resource, the Karura Forest. This forest is the life blood of Kenya, and if we allow it to be cut down for luxury housing developments, we will only see a greater rift between the rich and the poor.

Woman 1: But how will we stop them? They have already started to clear the forests.

WM: We will start by replanting trees at the gate. Although they may try to stop us, the trees will be a symbol of the forest belonging to the public.
(The thugs start to file out on the opposite side of the stage, brandishing clubs, whips, and other crude weapons)

Woman 2: (shrieks) Look there inside the gate! Hundreds of men are coming our way!

Woman 3: They are carrying weapons!

Woman 4: What should we do?

WM: There are nearly 200 of them and fewer than 20 of us. These thugs are spoiling for trouble and the police will not protect us. Let's plant one tree outside the gate and leave. (Wangari begins to walk forward, a shovel and tree seed in hand, the women close behind)

Thug 1: Stop her! Do not let her plant a single tree!

Thug 2: Get them!

(The men charge; they yell and pretend to beat the women. The leader whips WM in the head as she kneels to dig the hole, and she falls to the ground. The women surround her to protect her and take her to the far side of the stage tending to her wounds.)

Faith: Was Wangari alright? What happened next?

Constance: Well, as Wangari predicted, the police did not help her and would not investigate the accident. She insisted on filing a police report, however, and signed it with the blood from her head wound. Wangari had to spend several days recovering in the hospital, stating...
(Her voice trails off)

WM: (Wangari rises from her position on the stage). As soon as I recover I shall return to Karura Forest, even if they bury me there!
(All cast files off stage.)

Scene 8: Kitale, Kenya, 2002

(Constance continues to narrate. Two boxes are placed center-stage to represent voting booths. Women are lined up to cast votes on oversized piece of paper. They are holding signs "Vote Mwai Kibaki" and "Make your voice heard!" At stage left, women are listening to speeches given in support of the Green Belt Movement and Wangari Maathai.)

Grandmother Constance: Despite incredible setbacks like the one at the Karura Forest, regular beatings during peaceful demonstrations, vilification by the government and forceful resistance by the police, Wangari never stopped fighting for the principles that she believed in and the land that she loved. It took decades, but the Green Belt Movement swept the country and gained overwhelming support among the people of Kenya. Even as Wangari was beaten down, other women carried on her legacy.

Woman 8: Wangari fought to restore the beauty of Kenya and maintain a true democracy. Let's keep her vision alive!

Female voting official: (monitoring the voting): Step right up, cast your vote in the 2002 multi-party elections! Every voice is important; every vote counts!
(Women continue to vote, shoving papers in the ballot)

Grandmother Constance: The Green Belt movement was also instrumental in causing the collapse of the repressive presidential regime under Daniel arap Moi. Wangari's fight for justice, along with the support of tens of thousands of women across Kenya helped to bring democracy to the country through peaceful means.

Female voting official: (pulling the ballots from the box) The votes have been tallied and the new president of Kenya is....Mwai Kibaki!)

All women: Hooray!!

Women 1: (running in from stage left) This just in! Wangari Maathai has been voted to the national parliament with a landslide victory...over 98 percent of the votes! Kibaki has appointed her as the Deputy Minister of the Environment!

All women: Praise the lord! Our prayers have been answered! Hooray!

Scene 9: Nairobi, Kenya, 2004
(Constance narrates as WM accepts the Nobel Peace Prize.)

Grandmother Constance: It seemed that Wangari's faith and commitment to the future of Kenya had brought her many new blessings...but one of the best achievements was yet to come.

Nobel Peace Presenter: And the winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize is....Wangari Maathai!

Audience: (erupting into applause) Woo-hoo!

WM: (entering stage left in a nice dress and walking to stand behind a podium): Ladies and Gentlemen, I stand before you and the world humbled by this recognition and uplifted by the honor 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. As a mother, I appreciate the inspiration this brings to the youth and urge them to use it to pursue their dreams.

I know that African people everywhere are encouraged by this news. Let us embrace democratic governance, protect human rights and protect our environment. I am confident that we shall rise to the occasion. I have always believed that solutions to most of our problems must come from us.

Grandmother Constance: Wangari felt that the Nobel Committee had given her the award to send a message that protecting and restoring the environment contributes to peace. The day she received the news that she had been selected, she celebrated by planting a tree in her home region of Nyeri in the face of Mount Kenya. The words of her speech not only echoed through the crowd that day, but were passed from woman to woman, from mother to child for years to come.

Woman 2: Together, we 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. This work continues.

Woman 3: Although initially the Green Belt Movement's tree planting activities did not address issues of democracy and peace, it soon became clear that responsible governance of the environment was impossible without democratic space. Therefore, the tree became a symbol for the democratic struggle in Kenya.

Woman 4: 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. Using trees as a symbol of peace is in keeping with a widespread African tradition. For example, the elders of the Kikuyu carried a staff from the *thigi* tree that, when placed between two disputing sides, caused them to stop fighting and seek reconciliation. Many communities in Africa have these traditions.

Woman 5: 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.

Woman 6: Africans, especially, should re-discover positive aspects of their culture. In accepting them, they would give themselves a sense of belonging, identity and self-confidence. Ladies and Gentlemen, 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.

Whole cast chorus: That time is now!

Scene 10: The Family Farm, 2006
(Everyone except Constance and Faith file offstage.)

Faith: Wow, Bibi. I had no idea how important this tree—and all trees—are to our land and our country. Wangari Maathai sounds like an amazing woman, and I want to be just like her when I grow up.

Grandmother Constance: That sounds like a great idea, Faith. Wangari Maathai is a role model for all women. But why do you have to wait until you grow up to be just like her?

Faith (thinks about it for a moment): You're right, Bibi, I can play cati later. I've got something more important to do now. (Pause) Bibi, will you help me to plant a tree.

Grandmother Constance: Of course I will. Let's dig a hole and get started.

(Constance and faith dig a hole; they take a sapling and together, place it in the ground.)

--THE END--

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