

## **Wangari Muta Maathai, 1940–2011**

### ***A Remembrance***

Mia MacDonald

*Purpose:* that for me was the essence of Wangari Maathai. She worked long hours, didn't waste time, and maintained a punishing travel schedule, particularly after 2004 when she became the first African woman and first environmental campaigner to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I had the extraordinary privilege of working closely with Wangari for about a decade, on writing projects (including her autobiography, *Unbowed*) and policy and program initiatives for the Green Belt Movement (GBM), the NGO she founded in 1977. Back then, Wangari was a university professor, with no thought that GBM's tree-planting and mobilization of rural women would be emulated worldwide.

Wangari sought new ways to approach and solve problems. If something was wrong, why couldn't it be righted? Why couldn't individuals, no matter their position in society or the state of their environment, take responsibility for their actions (or inaction) and create change, if only on a micro level? Why did the powerful, whether in Kenya (where she served as an MP and deputy environment minister) or elsewhere, make the people they were responsible for governing and the long-term health of Earth their priorities? Wangari fought against hypocrisy, incompetence, and the arrogance of those who exploited forests and people, and this put many powerful people's noses out of joint. That didn't stop her. She was always polite, but she was also relentless. Her life wasn't easy, even after she became a Nobel laureate.

Wangari was one of the rare people who are the same whether up-close or at a distance. She was warm, frank, attentive, and treated everyone equally. She was always thinking; her brow would furrow in concentration or puzzlement at what she'd just heard. Her brilliance and fearlessness could be intimidating; but she also laughed a lot, liked to flip through celebrity magazines, and could be pointedly self-effacing. She'd been born on April 1 in what was then British Kenya; more than once I heard her say that perhaps she was the greatest fool there'd ever been. When Wangari got the news she's won the peace prize, her first words were: "I didn't know anybody was listening." I know, because I was sitting next to her when the phone rang; one of the more singular experiences of my life.

Wangari was only seventy-one when cancer took her life. Her work continues through GBM and the Wangari Maathai Institute for Peace and Environmental Studies at the University of Nairobi. She designed the Institute to bring the grassroots work, values, and individuals of GBM to the classroom, and to immerse academics and students in the realities of lived communities. 2015 saw the launch of the Wangari Muta Maathai House, to be built at the GBM training center. The House will be a “living memorial” encompassing an interactive museum of Wangari’s life and achievements, her archives, a retreat space for activists and change agents, and a learning center, with a focus on youth programs.

The Hindu gods are said not to cast shadows, since their radiance is embedded. Wangari’s was, too, and Earth and all its inhabitants are the poorer for her no longer being here. We can, though, seek a sliver of that light to illuminate our endeavors, to clarify our own sense of purpose. She’d want that for us, and for this world.

*Mia MacDonald is founder and executive director of Brighter Green ([www.brightergreen.org](http://www.brightergreen.org)), a New York-based public policy action tank raising awareness and encouraging policy action on issues that span the environment, animals, and global sustainability. She also chairs the board of Green Belt Movement International-U.S.. You can read more about Wangari, her legacy, the Institute, and the House at [www.wangarimaathai.org](http://www.wangarimaathai.org).*