Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

Barbara Shaw Anderson
African Studies Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
ASA 2011, Washington, DC
Special thanks to Prof. Eunice Njeri Sahle, for her presentation on Wangari Maathai in 2008
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduce educators to:</th>
<th>Reflect on:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The story of Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya</td>
<td>Best practices in teaching about human rights issues in Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching materials such as “Taking Root” documentary and <em>Seeds of Change</em> CABA book</td>
<td>Inspiration for us and for our students to <strong>recommit to democratic values and practices right HERE!</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Anybody can dig a hole and plant a tree. You have to nurture it, you have to water it, you have to keep at it until it becomes rooted so it can take care of itself. There are so many enemies of trees.” Wangari Maathai, “This much I Know,” The Observer Magazine, 8 June 2008

Anybody can dig a hole and plant DEMOCRACY. You have to nurture it, you have to water it, you have to keep at it until it becomes rooted so it can take care of itself. There are so many enemies of DEMOCRACY.
What did you drink this morning?
Wangari Maathai, 1940-2011

- Born in Nyeri, Kenya, the daughter of landless peasants.
- Won scholarships to study biology in the U.S. and Germany in the 1960s.
- First woman from East or Central Africa to earn a PhD.
- Began the Green Belt Movement in 1977
- Arrested, jailed, beaten in the 1980s and 90s
- Nobel Peace Prize 2004
Because of her training as a scientist, Maathai was able to recognize

- Deforestation
- Diminished water supplies
- Generalized environmental degradation
- Hunger and poverty
- Questioning the entire notion of “development.”
Green Belt Movement became central to democratization in Kenya

- Invitation comes from the community
- Empowering women to find their own solutions to their own problems.
- Expert knowledge not as valuable as local knowledge
Cultivating environmental sensibilities

• Promoting autonomy and self-confidence
• Restores women’s visible worth in the community
• Women deal with hunger and poverty by planting food crops and selling seeds and plants
Helps people question WHY

- Question power on local, national, and global levels.
- Seeking always the CONNECTIONS between issues and problems.
TREE = Democratic Struggle

“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”

--Wangari Maathai, 2004
“This woman has bugs in her head!”
--President Daniel arap Moi
Wangari Maathai and many other Africans have paid dearly for their work to broaden democracy in Africa:

- Jailed
- Beaten
- Raped
- Exiled
- Murdered
Reflections on Teaching Human Rights Issues

Frequent issues taught:
• Uganda, child soldiering
• Rwanda, genocide
• South Africa, apartheid
• Liberia, civil war
• Sudan, genocide/civil war
What are Africans doing about human rights issues in their own societies?
2011 Nobel Peace Prize winners

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Leymah Gbowee and Tawakkul Karman
2 films that show African solutions to human rights issues and the growth of democracy
Choose carefully where you start the lesson

If you begin with atrocities, you will never get your students beyond them.
Find the connections to the US
What are *our* complex problems?

Why haven’t Americans been able to end homelessness or alcoholism or unequal education?
Environmental Activism and Democracy-growing in the US
African “special capacity”?

- Avoid the **unimaginable** and the **inexplicable**
- What circumstances and preconditions would cause ordinary people like us to experience this?

[Consider making connections to Katrina, Iraq, lynchings, meth labs, Tar Sands Act, etc.]
Teach Africa when you don’t have to! These are heroes for the world, and their commitments to justice can inspire all of us, always.
Books about Wangari Maathai

- Seeds of Change
- Mama Miti
- Unbowed
Online resources on Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement

- www.greenbeltmovement.com
- www.takingrootfilm.com
- http://rfkcenter.org/sttp/profile/wangari-maathai
Special thanks to Prof. Eunice Njeri Sahle, University of North Carolina, for her presentation on Wangari Maathai in 2008