Wangari Maathai and a Global Rhetoric of Sustainability

ABSTRACT

Wangari Maathai of Kenya—environmentalist, democracy activist, women’s rights champion, legislator, first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize—accomplished her successes by developing a “rhetoric of sustainability”: a discourse galvanizing support among the formerly powerless at the same time that it spoke truth to power. That discourse invokes symbolic terms to connect sustainability to respect for women and their potential power in society; to progressive economics; and to democratic politics. Maathai also uses rhetorical traditions such as logos, and an ethos of place, from classical Greece, and infers near-contemporary theories of social rhetoric from Mikhail Bakhtin and Kenneth Burke, to achieve her transformative rhetoric of sustainability.

The great twentieth-century rhetorician Kenneth Burke asserts that language often provides a sense of identity and commonality for a community. For Burke, language can be a means of reconciliation; common language, the invocation of powerful terms, is not simply a by-product emerging from a society, but actually makes civilized and cooperative society possible. As Burke puts it (writing in italics to emphasize the point):

For rhetoric as such is not rooted in any past condition of human society. It is rooted in an essential function of language itself, a function that is wholly realistic, and is continually born anew; the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation
in beings that by nature respond to symbols. (43)

Dr. Wangari Maathai enacted an activist life in Kenya that required all of the power of rhetoric, transformed her own society through her leadership, and consistently used language and symbols to induce cooperation. In her lifetime (she died in 2011) and in her homeland, she mustered an original and highly effective rhetoric to transform conditions of environmental sustainability, and in doing so influenced her nation’s progress in women’s rights, in transparent governance, and in economic progress. As a result, she provided a viable model not just for environmental sustainability, but for social and cultural sustainability. Moreover, since her lifetime, this holistic model of sustainability has spread globally, based on the rhetorical power of her key terms and on the symbols she used so wisely.

Born in 1940, Wangari Maathai life was “a series of firsts: the first woman to gain a Ph.D. in East and Central Africa; the first female chair of a department at the University of Nairobi; and the first African woman and the first environmentalist to receive the Nobel Peace Prize (2004)” (“Green Belt Movement”). After obtaining her bachelor’s and master’s degrees in the United States and doing postdoctoral work in Germany, she earned her Ph.D. in anatomy from the University of Nairobi. These were just a few of her achievements; she eventually taught in three American institutions, was awarded 15 honorary doctorates from four nations, earned 50 international awards, wrote four books, and published many articles and speeches (“Biography”).

As related in the documentary Taking Root, Maathai’s activism was conditioned by her experience, in youth, of rural life in Nyeri, Kenya, where she grew up in a healthy and relatively undisturbed natural environment, and where the forests provided many resources and abundant water to sustain the simple but productive economic lives of the people. By the time she was an adult, however, logging and the influence of multinational corporations on land use policy had
destroyed the forests, eliminating the water-replenishing cycles that allowed rural people to live comfortably and sustainably. This macroeconomically-induced devastation placed particular hardships on women, who traditionally gathered water for household and agricultural use; by the 1970s, rural Kenyan women’s lives were consumed by the need to travel long distances to obtain minimal amounts of water, water that frequently was industrially polluted. As a member of Kenya’s National Council of Women, Maathai introduced a policy of organizing women to plant and nurture trees in order to replenish the forests; this forestry led to paid jobs for many of the women, and improved both the economic and environmental conditions of life in rural Kenya.

But her actions sometimes ran afoul of government schemes to sell land and its resources to multinational corporations, in a context of bribery and backroom deals. When Maathai’s environmental activism began to include political agitation in favor of democracy, she was harassed, questioned, jailed, and eventually freed due to the pressure provided by the mass movement she had started among Kenyan women, whose sense of self-empowerment as environmental regenerators enabled them to take democratic action. The final confrontation came when one of the last green spaces in urbanized Nairobi was sold, in murky circumstances, to a multinational corporation for real estate development. The political savvy that allowed Maathai to negotiate the sexist structures of Kenyan academia served her well as she turned her efforts to the need for transparent democracy in the national government. Maathai and her Green Belt Movement organization of women fostered democratic change in Kenya that preserved the last green space in Nairobi and led to victories for her Green Belt Movement’s environmental initiatives nationally. (I highly recommend that you see the documentary Taking Root, winner of 10 international film awards, for the remarkable details of this exciting and triumphant struggle.)

In Kenya’s newly democratized legal context, in 2002, Maathai became a representative to the
parliament, and from 2003 to 2007 served as Assistant Minister for Environment and National Resources (“Biography”).

Dr. Wangari Maathai’s remarkable rhetorical power is rooted first of all in powerful symbols. Among the first and most central symbols Maathai used was the planted tree. As the simple act of planting trees represented the rejuvenation of the Kenyan countryside, the planted tree—or the act of planting trees—is central to ecological sustainability, and to the positive social effects growing from ecological sustainability.

Closely linked to the symbol of the planted tree is the symbol of the hummingbird. After Maathai’s death, the “I Am the Hummingbird Campaign” has been the main means of actualizing her vision. As described in the Green Belt Movement website and in a section of the environmental documentary Dirt: The Movie in which Maathai herself talks about the campaign, the hummingbird is a symbol of the power of even the smallest individual to effect change when catastrophe threatens. Maathai tells a folk tale in which the forest is threatened by fire; the large and dominant animals run or dither, but the tiny hummingbird knows that it must do what it can to stave off destruction, and its actions lead to the preservation of the forest. This symbol and tale tells us, of course, that individual action for environmental sustainability can overcome the rapacity or inaction of governments or corporations.

I’d like to compare the Hummingbird Campaign to the principle known as the Butterfly Effect. As the MathWorld website explains, “Due to nonlinearities in weather processes, a butterfly flapping its wings in Tahiti can, in theory, produce a tornado in Kansas” (“Butterfly Effect”). The clear comparison of the Butterfly Effect to the Hummingbird Campaign is that in both cases, the active efforts of a small organism in the larger world can lead to real change, change on a scale magnified far beyond the original action—but change that would be
impossible, nonexistent, without the original action of the single, small player. In both cases, the opposite of the effect—be it initiated by butterfly or hummingbird—is entropy, a static and lifeless immobility. The significant difference is that the Butterfly Effect is not teleological; it tends toward no specific goal or result, and in fact is a major expression of “chaos theory” because one cannot easily calculate the numerous factors. Maathai’s Hummingbird Campaign draws on a similar power of individual and tiny original action, but postulates specifically positive results.

One more symbolic theme emerges from a reading of Wangari Maathai’s major addresses and writings: the theme of “linkages.” Sometimes addressed in variant terms such as “relationships,” or in talk of “connections,” this key term underlies Dr. Maathai’s assumptions about activism, particularly the interrelation of action on environmental sustainability, women’s social power, political transparency, cultural vigor, and economic sustainability in a context of social justice. It is difficult to overestimate the number of positive effects that Wangari Maathai finds in the linkages among environmental sustainability (starting with the hummingbird-scale planting of single tree by a concerned and self-empowered individual) and all other cultural and social goods. These terms are powerfully invoked in many of Maathai’s writings; for a concentrated example, see her Nobel Prize acceptance speech (Maathai 374-78). As the single small act of planting a tree leads to the empowerment of women who are doing the planting, the linkages of a healthy environment to social and political and cultural progress are both linear and recursive. One good act is linked to others, and the repercussions are positive in systemic ways. We may once again look to the example of the hummingbird. “Hummingbirds and honeysuckle flowers have developed in ways that benefit each other,” the Center for Ecoliteracy explains; “the hummingbirds color and vision and slender bill coincide with the colors and shapes of the
flowers” (“Ecological Principles”), and thus the symbol of linkages intersects well with the hummingbird as an example of symbiotic ecological harmony. The linkages central to Maathai’s Kenyan cultural narrative closely parallel important principles in classical Greek rhetorical theory, specifically the notions of *logos* and *ethos* that make up a major portion of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*.

Loosely translatable as “logic” but also the literal word for “word,” *logos* is the rhetorical principle that suggests that people may be persuaded by the syllogistic connections of reason—that is, the logical validity—of a position or argument; *logos* also suggests the power of persuasion that is in the associations we make with words themselves. Maathai tells the story of how planting trees in the denuded, industrially damaged Kenyan countryside restored clean water and thus logically provided better health to Kenyan communities; how women’s employment as stewards of newly planted trees gave them control over their environment and logically helped them to a more empowered place in the economic productivity of their communities; how women and rural communities, once they had a stake in the environment, logically became more willing to protest environmental destruction caused by corrupt government sellouts to multinational corporations; and how protest of environmental destruction logically led to a change in government for the better.

Similarly, the classical Greek rhetorical principle of *ethos* is loosely translatable as “ethical appeal,” but goes beyond personal credibility and trustworthy voice of a speaker. As the current rhetorical theorist Rise Applegarth notes, *ethos* has developed, in rhetorical scholarship, a tradition of connection to place. As Applegarth says, “rhetors learn to enact culturally specific notions of ‘good will, good sense, good moral character’ through their participation in particular communities…within *places*, to shared norms that make *ethos* effective” (43, italics in text).
Think of the credibility we assign to “local knowledge” of a native in many contexts. Maathai, then, draws on this location-specific *ethos* by wisely citing, very frequently, her own African experience as a rural Kenyan as well as her Western education to support her conclusions and consciousness. To cite just one example, she accepts her Nobel Prize “on behalf of the people of Kenya and Africa” and appreciates its inspirational power as “a mother”; later in the acceptance speech, she cites her “childhood experiences and observations of Nature in rural Kenya” where she “witnessed forests being cleared and replaced by commercial plantations, which destroyed local biodiversity” (Maathai 374-75). In the same speech, she tells the story of her “childhood experience when I would visit a stream next to our home to fetch water for my mother,” drinking the clean water, playing with frogs’ eggs and tadpoles “wriggling through the clear water against the background of the brown earth”; but now she has seen “the stream has dried up, women walk long distances for water, which is not always clean, and children will never know what they have lost,” leaving us with the “challenge…to restore the home of the tadpoles and give back to our children a world of beauty and wonder” (Maathai 379). She cites her place-rooted experience, her witness as a woman and as a mother, to enhance her *ethos*; and thus her positions, no matter how scientifically accurate and measurably positive in their ecological results, carry with them a ring of absolute gut-level believability as well as brain-level truth.

We can end this brief examination of Wangari Maathai’s powerful rhetoric of sustainability by citing Mikhail Bakhtin’s comment on the social and historical power of the most important rhetoricians of a given era:

In each epoch, in each social circle, in each small world of family, friends, acquaintances, and comrades in which a human being grows and lives, there are always authoritative utterances that set the tone—artistic, scientific, and journalistic works on which one
relies, to which one refers, which are cited, imitated, and followed. In each epoch, in all areas of life and activity, there are particular traditions that are expressed and retained in verbal vestments: in written works, in utterances, in sayings, and so forth. There are always some verbally expressed leading ideas of the “masters of thought” of a given epoch…(88-89)

Let us recognize Dr. Wangari Maathai as one of these “masters of thought” (or a mistress of thought, if you prefer); and let us hope that her rhetoric is seen as authoritative, that it is amply cited, imitated, and followed in all areas of life and activity. Our world is sorely in need of Maathai’s powerful rhetoric of sustainability.

Works Cited


“Ecological Principles.” Center for Ecoliteracy.


Biography

William B. Lalicker (Ph.D., University of Washington) has 25 years’ experience administering writing programs and incorporating issues of intercultural rhetoric into the discourse of the field of English. He has published on a wide range of issues in the theory and pedagogy of rhetoric, and has chaired national organizations in the discipline. Currently, he is Professor of English and Dean’s Assistant for Student Issues in the College of Arts and Sciences at West Chester University.