



**WANGARI MAATHAI AND SERUDJ TA:
FACING MT. KENYA, REPAIRING THE WORLD**
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DR. MAULANA KARENKA

This month during which we celebrate Earth Day and the birthday of one of earth's most honored, capable and committed advocates, the Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, author and activist, Dr. Wangari Maathai of Kenya (4/1/1940), we are reminded of the urgent obligation to reflect deeply and respond in meaningful and effective ways to the ancient African ethical imperative of *serudj ta*, i.e., to repair, remake and renew the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

This moral mandate of *serudj ta* is found in the ancient Egyptian sacred text, *The Husia*, which teaches us to see and sense the world as sacred space, as a shared heritage given by the Divine; respected and constantly renewed by the ancestors and left to us as a rich legacy to cherish, care for and continue to renew and then pass on to future generations to do likewise. Indeed, *serudj ta* is a constant call and ongoing obligation to actively care for the health, wholeness and sustainment of the world: to constantly raise up the ruined; repair the damaged; rejoin the severed; replenish the depleted; strengthen the weakened; set right the wrong; and make firm and flourish the insecure and undeveloped.

In our striving to understand and practice *serudj ta* in ever more effective and meaningful ways, and to walk gently, justly and rightly in the world, we are drawn to the writings and work of Dr. Wangari Maathai. Maathai began her work and writing seeking to ground herself, her co-workers and the people in vital "spiritual values for healing ourselves and the world." Linking concern with the environment with social justice for the people, she notes sadly how colonization undermined and eroded the African sense of self and of the sacred, discrediting views and values, suppressing language and punishing resistance in various ways. Thus, "hallowed

landscapes lost their sacredness and were exploited as the people became insensitive to the destruction, accepting it as a sign of progress."

For her, then, the work of healing the world was not only a matter of healing the environment, but also doing work "necessary to heal the wounds inflicted" on oppressed communities and to enable them "to rediscover their authentic voice and speak out on behalf of their rights (human, environmental, civic and political)." In a word, she says, "Our task also became to expand democratic space in which ordinary citizens could make the decision on their own behalf to benefit themselves, their community, their country and the environment that sustains them."

In discussing the ancient life-affirming, earth-preserving ways of her ancestors, Maathai talks of the sense of the sacred that surrounded Mt. Kenya within her ethnic group, the Gikuyu. Indeed, Jomo Kenyatta, the liberation leader, founding father and first president of Kenya, affirming the wisdom and worth of Gikuyu culture and its deep sense of the sacred, titled his seminal work, *Facing Mt. Kenya*. It spoke to the spiritual practice of turning toward the Divine, the sacred and sustaining. It is this book from which, in the Sixties, I took my name Karenga—nationalist, defender of the people and keeper of the tradition, and which I used among others in conceptualizing the centrality of cultural grounding and cultural revolution in struggles of liberation and life in my philosophy, Kawaida. This turning toward and returning to the upward paths of our ancestors and ancient culture and retrieving best ideas and practices to use to repair, remake and renew the world can rightfully be called "Facing Mount Kenya."

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Thus, by returning to their own rich, ancient and varied cultural values, Maathai says, Africans regain their “self-identity, self-confidence and self-respect.” Moreover, they build on a cultural heritage which “allows them to be in harmony with their physical and spiritual environment,” provides “the basis for their personal peace,” “enhances their capacity for self-leadership, decision-making and self-guidance,” and serves as “their antennae into the unknown future and their reference point into their past.”

Dr. Maathai offers four core values which guide the Green Belt Movement she founded and serve as a framework for environmental work in the world. The first value is *“love for the environment,”* an active caring which “motivates one to take positive action for the earth, such as planting trees and ensuring that they survive; nurtur(ing) those trees that are standing; protect(ing) animals and their habitat; conserv(ing) soil; and other related life-affirming and world-preserving activities.

Second, she stresses *“gratitude and respect for the Earth’s resources.”* This means “valuing all that the earth gives us and because of that valuation, not wanting to waste any of it; and therefore practicing the three R’s: reduce, reuse and recycle.” Again, it means seeing the earth as sacred space and walking gently, justly and rightly on it. Third, Maathai posits the value of *“self-empowerment and self-betterment,”* stressing “the desire to improve one’s life and life circumstances through the spirit of self-reliance,” avoiding “inertia and self-destructive activities” and embracing one’s own sense of agency through “the understanding that the power to change is with you.”

Fourth, Dr. Maathai emphasizes the indispensability of *service*, “using one’s time, energy and resources to provide services to others without expecting or demanding compensation, appreciation or even recognition.” It is a constant self-giving in personal and collective efforts “to achieve the common good.” Also, Dr. Maathai tells us that the struggle to repair, remake and renew the environment must take place in the context of the continuing struggle for liberation of the continent as a whole. She reminds us of three major objectives that “the first post-colonial African rulers” set for African people: “to decolonize the entire continent; to promote unity; (and) to effect economic and social development.” But she notes, echoing Toure, Fanon and Malcolm, that “a more difficult agenda will be to de-colonize the mind and reclaim the cultural and spiritual heritage of the African people” necessary to complete these tasks.

Dr. Maathai tells us that “we are called to assist the earth, to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own.” This stress on agency and possibility reaffirms the Kawaida contention that we are *injured physicians* who must heal and repair ourselves in the process and practice of healing and repairing the world. And this requires our returning to the upward and enlightening paths of our ancestors, *facing Mt. Kenya*, really Mt. Kirinyaga, the Place of Brightness, which looms like a giant lighthouse high above the horizon of history, pointing toward new possibilities for human flourishing and the well-being of the world, if we walk gently, act justly and relate rightfully in and for the world.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, www.MaulanaKarenga.org.