Taking Care of Our World

Mother Nature is mystifying. As the busy worker goes about his or her day, the beauty of nature is rarely given the credit it deserves. Many people don’t have the time to take a breath of fresh air and pay respects to the trees that dutifully filter our oxygen. Winner of the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize, Wangari Maathai, works to bring the world back to reality, one tree at a time.

I live in Seattle where trees are abundant and it is hard to see the effects of deforestation and global warming. Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya where a corrupted government is dominant and green trees are scarce. The particular degrading role of women sparked Maathai’s interest to play an active role in reversing the injustices. Her compassion for others combined with the need for trees in her village provided an opportunity for women to “conserve their environment and improve their quality of life.”¹ The beginning of the Green Belt Movement has resulted in the planting of over twenty million trees and has stimulated not only Kenya’s economy but the lives of the oppressed race of women. The Movement started with a few women planting trees but eventually evolved into a pro-democracy movement.

Wangari Maathai exemplifies an individual with a cause who invested enough faith in herself to truly shape the culture and thought of modern society. It is leaders like Maathai who stand for the belief that each individual contribution counts, who encourage others to follow her lead. I first became aware of Maathai’s work when she gave a speech at a local hall. As an ongoing metaphor representing the inspirational words to “never give up” Maathai told a simple story that I will never forget.

It all started, Maathai spoke, with a raging forest fire. All of the animals scattered away from the danger, gathering at a safe distance away from the threatening flames. They watched in fear as their majestic trees were reduced to ash, as their beloved homes were being destroyed.

¹ http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/w.php?id=3
Feeling powerless and scared they noticed a flutter in the corner of their eye. It was the littlest of them all, the hummingbird, who said, "I can do something about this fire. I'm not going to sit on the side and watch the forest burn."

The hummingbird decided to take an active stance and flew over to the nearest stream scooping up a bead of water into its beak and dropping it on the fire. Over and over the hummingbird repeated this action. The little bird hoped to fight the fire, one drop at a time. All the other animals who listlessly stood nearby joked to each other about the stupidity of the bird’s actions. Instead of helping, the animals shot out discouraging words, criticizing the bird’s seemingly hopeless optimism. Finally, the hummingbird stopped and said modestly, “I’m doing the best I can, and that’s all we can do.”

This small piece of folklore personifies the hummingbirds and discouraging voices each person may experience in their lives. Maathai reinforces the moral responsibility we carry to be like the hummingbird and make a positive contribution to our world. She says that a strong society doesn’t always wait for the government to act and there is no reason to make excuses or hold back. “We do not need to wait until we have killed each other, until we have destroyed each other, [or until] we have destroyed our countries”² to take action. By listening to each other we can uncover the deeper wounds our country has tried to cover up.

As the first African woman and the first environmentalist to receive the Nobel Peace Prize as well as other reputable awards during her lifetime, Maathai has proven her role as the “hummingbird” of her society. Through her relentless struggle for democracy, human rights and environmental conservation she has spread her desire for change on a larger scale than ever imagined. Hopefully, with each seed she plants, the hope for new beginnings will be restored.

² http://www.conncoll.edu/events/speeches/maathai.html
With Wangari Maathai’s morals and beliefs rooted firmly in the ground, the budding ideas of others like Maathai will grow stronger and will flourish with the encouragement of others.

Inspired by Maathai’s compassion and dedication to humanity I am determined to be like the hummingbird and take an active stance in my surroundings. If I could choose one international issue to tackle it would be global warming. As the years progress, the effects of global warming, which were once regarded as a distance threat, are becoming magnified with the physical proof of drying rivers and melting ice caps. “The global rate of ice melt has more than doubled since 1988 and could raise sea levels 27 centimetres by 2100.”³ As the earth’s population rises, carbon emissions and the continual burning of fossil fuels create dangers to our atmosphere, threatening the fragile balance of our environment. By creating awareness of this catastrophic situation Maathai has used the planting of trees as a way to reverse the deadly future our world faces.

While global warming cannot be completely halted there are still things that we, as citizens of this world can do to slow the process. By doing simple things such as taking the bus, carpooling, turning off lights, or taking shorter showers energy could be saved. Even the smallest contributions count. I am interested in studying the field of International Relations in college next year which may create more opportunities for me to create awareness of energy conserving lifestyles to be spread internationally.

I believe that if leaders take the time to raise awareness and encourage understanding, our world can become more appreciative and respectful of our surroundings. It’s going to take the compassion of others to take care of our environment.