



**REPAIRING AND REMAKING THE WORLD:
AN ENVIRONMENTAL VISION OF JUSTICE**

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As Earth Day approaches this year, it provides an important opportunity to focus on critical environmental issues in a post-Katrina era of devastating storms and flooding, increasingly disastrous climate change, continuing toxic contamination of land, water and air, the ravaging of rain forests, the racist sacrificing of the health and well-being of disfavored peoples and the addictive consumerism of a self-medicating society, busily making itself insensitive to human suffering and the problematic conditions and future of the world. Surely, a rightful approach to the environment begins with rethinking our relationship with the world, our place in it, our obligation towards it and the cost, casualties and future-diminishing consequences of our current deadly course and the thinking and practices which undergird and inform it.

We must question the human-centered arrogance that led to the self-assigning of humans, in the name of God, gun and the questionable good of “man”, the right to dominate, tread down, and relentlessly exploit the earth. And we must ask ourselves in earnest what real or hidden reasons, latent logic or simple self-saving commonsense is there in knowingly destroying the basis for life on the planet, including our own and that of future generations? In a word, what is the nature and need of the vulgar materialism, social madness and moral numbness that allow us to practice ecocide without considering, caring about or taking serious its sure and certain implications for human genocide?

As Africans we are compelled to practice a morality of remembrance and recovery, to reach back and dig deep in order to recover from our culture—ancient and modern—the best of what it means to be African

and human and bring it forth in the service of doing and sustaining good *in* and *for* the world, especially during times of urgent and focused action. This vision will have at its core values that reaffirm the oneness of being, the interrelatedness of life and the cooperative responsibility to build the good and sustainable world we all want and deserve.

This concept is rooted in the principle and practice of Maat, the moral ideal in ancient Egypt, which means and requires rightness in the world. It links the Divine, natural and social in an inseparable bond and sees the whole world as sacred space and a shared sacred heritage. Moreover, it recognizes the world is often damaged in natural and social ways and we must constantly act to repair, renew, remake and transform the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it. This is the meaning of the term *serudj ta*, a pillar of Maatian ethics.

But we can and must also extract models and messages for an environmental ethics from more recent times and learn valuable lessons from them. Clearly, the gentle and creative scientist, Dr. George Washington Carver, easily comes to mind. He not only made miracles out of peanuts, corn and soy, but also strengthened the poor subsistence farmers and helped transform and save Southern agriculture. He had come to Tuskegee Institute, he said, “for the benefit of my people”. Joining the faculty at the university, he not only taught various courses, but also linked campus and community, reaching out to small farmers, writing bulletins of suggestions, lecturing and conducting experiments with them and for their benefit.

His environmental vision began with a profound appreciation, even reverence for the natural world. In this regard, he taught

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kindness toward nature, expressed in his teaching that we should even “be kind to soil”. For “unkindness to anything is an injustice to that thing”. And there are consequences for this injustice. Dr. Carver also taught the “organic unity” of the world. He stressed “the mutual relationships of the animal, mineral and vegetable kingdoms and how utterly impossible it is for one to exist in a highly organized state without the other”. Moreover, he anticipated our later discussions of environmental racism, recognizing the intersection of race, poverty and land use and ownership and the greater inability of the poor to deal with radical changes in climate, soil or social conditions.

Dr. Carver was also a self-conscious conservationist, practicing the three R’s of environmentalism: “reduce, reuse and recycle”. Indeed, he said “My work is that of conservation, . . .” Moreover, he stated “as a rule we are wasteful”, but if people became aware of the interrelatedness of things and were ecologically conscious, they “could not help but recognize ways to make use of materials they had previously discarded or overlooked”.

Finally, he taught not only the complexity and interrelatedness of nature, but also its fragility. And he stressed long-term solutions rather than quick fixes which aggravate a problem and delay urgent attention which should be given to it. To sustain the world, we must be rightfully attentive to it, he taught. Thus, he said, “look about you, take hold of things that are here”, be kind to the world and all in it, detest waste, cooperate to create good and share it equitably and wisely.

But at the heart of any sound and effective environmental vision and practice must also be active engagement to change and end the social conditions that not only threaten and diminish the environment, but also devastate and destroy the people themselves. In a word, social justice is the foundation and fulcrum on which environmental justice is raised or founders. This is why Dr. Wangari Maathai, environmental activist, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate and founder of the Green Belt Movement, which has over 30 years, planted 30 million trees in Kenya, links democracy, human rights, sustainable development, and peace. It is also why she linked poverty, oppression and environmental degradation. She thus sought to empower the people thru inclusion and effective participation in building the world they want and deserve. Indeed, she says that thru work and struggle “they come to recognize that they are the primary custodians and beneficiaries of the environment that sustains them.” And they move to protect themselves and the environment from the “threat of globalization, commercialization, privatization and the piracy of biological materials found in (their lands)”.

Dr. Maathai also calls for an African cultural revival that reaffirms our ancient and ongoing reverence for nature and sense of oneness with the world, that “revive(s) our sense of belonging to a larger family with which we have shared our evolutionary process”. Our task, she concludes in the spirit and speech of *serudj ta* is “to assist the Earth to heal her wounds and in the process heal our own—indeed, to embrace the whole creation in all its diversity, beauty and wonder”.

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