



Empower and Serve

Vanderbilt University Senior Day Lecture by Wangari Maathai

Nobel Peace Laureate, 2004

UN Messenger of Peace

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Chancellor Zeppos, Professors, Graduates, Parents and Relatives, Distinguished Guests:

Allow me to express my gratitude for your very warm welcome to the Vanderbilt University in this beautiful city of Nashville, Tennessee. I want to thank Ed and Janice Nichols for the Nichols Chancellor award that has been bestowed upon me. Your support and facilitation has made our visit both pleasant and memorable.

Indeed upon arrival I could not help but hum to myself the "Beautiful Tennessee Waltz" by Page. I called one of your many famous sons, the Rt. Hon. Al Gore, who played the whole song for me. I hope that we can sing, at least a stanza to satisfy my nostalgia for the beautiful music of this region.

I recognize that your wonderful institution is founded on the spirit of goodwill and a culture of peace demonstrated by your founder, Cornelius Vanderbilt, whose financial gift made the founding of the university possible.

I feel a special affiliation to that spirit and wish to share with you that currently, I am involved in the establishment of an institute on peace and environmental studies in the University of Nairobi. It will offer an opportunity for academic staff and students who are interested in environmental sustainability, peace and community service. Visitors will participate in experiential learning initiatives in communities, which work with the Green Belt Movement.

I believe that especially in our part of the world, such experiential learning and extension service is missing in many institutions where those who have the knowledge and skills are set apart from communities that need them. The spirit of Mr. Vanderbilt can inspire us to not only continue to be among the top world performers academically, but to also become agents of change through empowering communities and providing service.

In 2005, 10 heads of states from Central Africa requested me to serve as goodwill ambassador for the Congo forest ecosystem and raise awareness on the role tropical forests play in regulating the world climate and providing many environmental services such as serving as home to a huge amount of biodiversity, regulating

rainfall patterns, holding soils together and preventing landslides and soil erosion. These services are vital for life but they are often taken for granted. The three main basins in Congo, Amazon and Southwest Asia are under serious threat due to deforestation and degradation. That is partly why the debate on climate change is important and I hope that you would join me in supporting these forests, also known as the three “lungs of the planet.”

In Japan we established a campaign that encourages responsible consumption patterns along the 3Rs (reuse, reduce, recycle). We also learnt of the concept known as *Mottainai*, which incorporates respect and gratitude to the 3Rs. I am sure that both on campus and in your communities, sustainability is a theme you embrace through 3Rs. We know that we live in a world where resources are finite. Unless all of us accept to exploit them more responsibly, accountably and share them more equitably, we shall not prevent causes of conflicts over resources like land, minerals, water and forests.

It was to address these issues that the work of the Green Belt Movement started. It was inspired by women, who were preparing to go to the very first UN Conference on Women in Mexico, in 1975. The agenda they took to Mexico was their felt needs for fuel, clean drinking water, nutritious foods and income. These are still relevant today.

After meeting, we started by establishing tree nurseries with women, who planted tree seedlings on their farms public areas and degraded forests. We encouraged them to plant indigenous species, fruits and imported species which had adapted well to the local conditions. We continue to have problems with imported species like the eucalyptus, which take too much water from the ground, especially when they are planted on watershed areas.

While addressing these felt needs, we recognized that they are closely linked to environmental degradation and disempowerment of communities. These are in turn precipitated by bad governance, disrespect for the rule of law, violation of human rights, unfair trade, debts, greed and corruption.

People living under such conditions become disempowered. They lose a sense of worth, pride and self-confidence. Gradually, they may even accept the prejudices against them and wait to be guided and directed by their tormentors. They get trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, underdevelopment and dependency.

Eventually, we saw the need to empower communities and encourage them to demand more democratic governance, respect for the rule of law and human rights.

To do so, we developed a training programme to teach groups to identify their problems look for the cause of the problems and also seek for solutions. In other words, to recognize that they are the cause of many of their problems and they have to look for solutions from within themselves. They may not find solutions to all their problems and may have to learn from others or even be assisted by friends and supporters. But eventually, they must be part of the solutions!

We wanted to reduce dependency, ignorance and fear; to encourage them to ask questions, address misinformation, encourage healthy living and find the linkage between environmental degradation and many of their problems. Once they went through the seminars, they too could utilize the extraordinary talents amongst them, set high standards for themselves and take charge of their lives. We have been serving in this area for the last three decades.

Gradually, communities have learnt that the more the land becomes degraded and incapable of supporting livelihoods, the more the people compete for the diminishing resources. To reduce the level of competition, this may lead to exclusion, oppression, and exploitation as citizens find excuses to deny others their rights, like access and control of the resources.

Subsequently, when those excluded recognize these injustices, they become angry and frustrated. To contain them, leaders may become dictatorial and oppressive. That is when the people may organize conflicts and undermine peace and security in their neighborhoods and beyond. We may call these conflicts inter-ethnic, inter-religious, tribal or racial conflicts, but they are essentially conflicts due to the competition over diminishing resources.

In the course of the work of the Green Belt Movement, we recognized that in order to live in peace with each other, it is important to deliberately promote a culture of peace. That is, learn to listen to each other, give space to each other, have compassion and understanding and reach out to each other. Also, be responsible, accountable and promote justice and equity. This seems to be spirit that moved Mr. Vanderbilt back in 1873 and it is the spirit that drives the work of the Green Belt Movement.

One of the worst outcomes of bad governance and injustices is poverty. It robs human beings of their dignity. When people are reduced to beggars, they feel weak, humiliated, disrespected and undignified. They hide alone in corners and trenches, not daring to raise their voices to be heard or seen. They are unable to organize and often suffer in isolation and in desperation.

There is a lot of poverty where I come from. Yet, as we all know, Africa is not poor. It is endowed with many resources We know that poverty is a symptom of gross political, social and economic injustices The poor are sick, hungry, naked and without shelter because they have largely been denied their political social and economic rights.

Yet all human beings deserve respect and dignity. It should be unacceptable to push human beings to levels of dehumanizing poverty. To fight such injustices, the Green Belt Movement addresses governance institutions and systems that allow such injustices both in our communities and beyond. While doing Green Belt Movement work we quickly recognized the linkage between the inability of the people to meet their basic needs and the fact that their environment was degraded and unable to sustain them. As they edge a life out of degraded environments, they find themselves deeper into poverty and fatalism, blaming it on fate and God.

The realization of the linkage between environmental degradation, governance and conflicts led the Green Belt Movement to concern itself not only with the causes of environmental degradation but systems of governance. It joined other organizations that formed the pro-democracy movement that restored democratic space to Kenya and inspired many within the region. One of the objectives of the Green Belt movement became to do what Peter and John did in the Biblical story in the Acts, Chapter three.

I want to share the story of Peter and John because I think it is a great lesson for those who wish to empower and serve communities in which they live. As you graduate, you will join a community wherever you go. You will serve. But, will you be a Peter and a John to those who may need you?

Those of you who read the Bible remember that these were two disciples of Jesus. They were confronted by a beggar as they went into a synagogue for prayer. The Bible says the beggar was born crippled. I imagine that he had all the characteristics of a disempowered person: the face of poverty and rejection, self-effacing, dejected, humiliated, very low self-esteem and no sense of wellbeing.

He did not even dare to look up to the people from whom he was begging. He was too ashamed of his status The Bible says that he bowed his head, hid his face and stretched his hand for handouts. He had given up trying and had accepted his plight.

Honorable graduates, unless you are very lucky, you are bound to meet many folks like that. But, note how Peter and John handled their situation:

The Bible says that upon seeing him in that dehumanized, fatalistic and humiliated state, Peter and John felt the need to rescue him. There must have been many worshippers who responded by giving him a few coins before entering the synagogue. But Peter and John reacted differently and decided to empower him instead, to give him back his sense of pride, his health, dignity and self-respect. They decided to encourage him to believe in himself so that he could work, earn his own living and no longer sit there and beg for charity.

And so Peter ordered him, "Look up!" That must have been a bit startling, because normally, people did not talk to him. People do not normally engage beggars in a friendly conversation, do they?

But Peter went on, "Silver and gold we have none, but what we have, we give to you." The beggar probably waited with much anticipation to receive the gift these two worshippers had for him. He must have expected more pennies from them. But Peter told him, "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, Rise up and walk!"

And Peter held him by the hand, helping him to stand up. And much to his surprise, the beggar felt his limbs get strong as he rose up and walked forward. He went into the synagogue praising God. He was an empowered man: no longer a beggar, no longer dehumanized. Now he could go and take care of himself with dignity and self-respect.

Upon graduation, each of you can be a Peter and a John for your communities and the world. You can decide to empower and serve those who will cross your path. When you leave the campus you will be everywhere: in governments, the private sector, religious organizations, in the professions and in non-government organizations. You can be change agents through your institutions. You can practice 3Rs in your daily lifestyle and work for communities to enjoy environmental rights. You can also ensure that rights of other species are respected. After all, we share the evolutionary process on this planet, and without them our own life would be threatened.

Disempowered people are conditioned to believe that they are doomed to their fate. Sometimes they turn to self-destructive activities like drugs, alcohol and crime. You can make your own life an inspiration to them just by living it right!

As you do so, remember, Peter and John called on the beggar to rise up and walk. It was not Peter and John who had to do the rising and the walking: it was the beggar.



We cannot do it for them. They must make the choice to respond to the call to “rise up and walk.” Some may not... but you will have done your part by calling.

The Biblical beggar could have preferred to stay put and continue to beg the rich worshippers. But he decided to respond to an opportunity, which presented itself, he was ready for it and his life was changed for the better. Peter and John were not looking for the opportunity. The beggar was. Even he teaches us that if we are not ready to take advantage of the opportunity, it might pass.

That is why the empowerment work of the Green Belt Movement is important: it prepares people to be ready when the opportunity presents itself.

Your years at Vanderbilt have prepared you to be perfect Peters and Johns (Janes!) You are in a position to be a great blessing to those who present themselves before you. Do not go past them and head for the synagogue. Vanderbilt has made you. You are a potential great change agent. You are ready. Go forth then, the world is waiting. Tell it, to Rise up and Walk!

Congratulations!