Trees and the Forest:

Story and Trustori in Quaker Faith and Practice

BY ROB PIERSON

The Wider Quaker Fellowship
La Asociación *de* amigos *de los* Amigos

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BY ROB PIERSON

The planting of trees is the planting of ideas. By starting with the simple act of planting a tree, we give hope to ourselves and to future generations. —Wangari Maathai[1]

Let your lives speak. —Quaker advice

Let me tell you a story.

Once upon a time, in a land far away, a young woman looked out at her poor village. She saw that the once green hills were now bare and the people scattered. There were only scraps and dung to burn for fire and swirling dust in the heat of the day. But where others saw only barren dirt, this woman saw a forest. She began to plant trees. People told her she was crazy. Some threatened her and told her to go away. Others made fun of her. After all, she was only a woman. But the woman just moved on from hill to hill, slowly planting. Now, these many years later, there is a forest. Where people competed for scraps to burn, now the village gathers wood to cook the evening meal. Now there is a break from the wind and an end to the swirling dust. Now, the community rests in the shade of leaves, and there are spreading roots to hold the ground. Now there is a place for rain to seep gently into the earth and replenish the streams. There are birds above and people below, singing and making their home. And the woman moves on from hill to hill.

But that's just a story, isn't it? Perhaps not a very good one. How about this: Thirty years ago, in Kenya, Wangari Maathai looked out at her country and where others saw a landscape of poverty, she saw a people of promise. She began planting the vision of trees in the people of the land, and these took root. She gave

1 Quotes from Wangari Maathai and information about her movement are taken from two sources: Wangari Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (New York: Lantern Books, 2004) and the website of the Green Belt Movement, http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/.

the people tools and showed them how to plant nurseries where they raised row upon row of seedlings. The vision of trees that she planted grew and spread until it colored green swaths around villages all across rural Africa and sent seedling visions sprouting to the far corners of the world. Her work led to what has become the Green Belt Movement, a complex intertwining of the human, ecological and political into an organic community that reforested a landscape formerly denuded by its impoverished population. Thirty million trees later, Wangari Maathai received the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize.

"Peace on earth," notes the Nobel committee "depends on our ability to secure our living environment… Maathai combines science, social commitment and active politics. More than simply protecting the existing environment, her strategy is to secure and strengthen the very basis for ecologically sustainable development… She represents an example and a source of inspiration for everyone in Africa fighting for sustainable development, democracy and peace."[2]

Over the years, the Green Belt movement has not only increased tree cover, but improved life for thousands of rural people, empowering individuals and building community while simultaneously raising awareness of environmental concerns. The basic tree-planting methodology is deliberately simple: Communities lack basic necessities, like wood for fuel. Therefore, focus on this one visceral "felt" need, and disseminate information on the importance of tree planting for the community. Encourage local groups to form and prepare tree nursery sites. Enable these local groups to provide seedlings to the community members and check that they are properly planted. Pay for each successfully planted seedling. The trees provide a sustainable fuel supply. The work provides income. The effort helps organize, empower and educate the people. This is an indigenous effort that deliberately chooses to rely on the wisdom, knowledge and resourcefulness of local people, particularly women. What grows are not just trees, but

2 2004 Nobel Peace Prize Announcement, quoted in Maathai, *The Green Belt Movement*, ix-x.

a network of village foresters and activists. It is the greening of both place and people.

This, too, of course, is just one version of the story, a story that is never so simple. As with any good story, there are obstacles: a lack of resources, lack of education, ethnic suspicion, people's tendency to blame others (particularly the government) and the government's own deserving of that blame, through its inadequacies and occasional malice. As a result, the Green Belt is inherently a political movement, with all of a political movement's struggle and messiness, and Maathai herself is a political figure. She is the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctoral degree, the first woman department chair in the region, and the first woman on the continent to win a Nobel Prize. In 2002, she was elected by an overwhelming vote to Kenya's parliament and became Assistant Minister for Environment and Natural Resources. She continues to work for democracy, human rights and environmental conservation. And, of course, Maathai did not act alone. Her story depends on the intersection of other people's stories, both women's and men's, individuals and communities, in Africa and beyond. The whole movement is an ecosystem, a thicket of lives, a forest of stories.

The overall goal of the Green Belt Movement is a way of life, a lived experience that motivates and inspires stewardship. Maathai says it is "to raise the consciousness of community members to a level that would drive them to do what was right for the environment because their hearts had been touched and their minds convinced."[3]

So this is a story about inspiration and convincement leading to transformation. Inspiration, convincement, and transformation — these are signs of a story of faith. As a Quaker, I hear a movement of Spirit in the rustling of these leaves.

> *He that planteth a tree is a servant of God, he provideth a kindness for many generations, and faces that he hath not seen shall bless him.* — Henry Van Dyke

3 Maathai, *The Greenbelt Movement*, 33.

As I read Wangari Maathai's book about the Green Belt Movement, I felt a strange sense of déjà vu. Something about it struck a chord and resonated. Where had I heard this before?

After days of pulling books off the shelf, I opened *Soul Food*, a book of tales gathered from various faith traditions by Jack Kornfield & Christina Feldman. Almost immediately, I turned to a dog-eared page and read: "This story was told to me by Li Pung, who is now an old man with a thin gray beard who sweeps the path to the Taoist temple outside the prosperous village of Feng Shr Li… At the end of the last century, there lived in this valley a man who the Taoists now revere as a dragon (which for the Taoists means the Spirit come alive on earth). Li Pung tells me his name was Tam Yang Bun."

Thus begins the story within a story, told to the narrator by the aging Li Pung about his long ago encounter with the elusive Tam Yang Bun. When Tam Yang Bun was young, he lived in a desolate village along a dry riverbed. He was a good boy, gifted and studious, received an education, and had a good job, married and had a family. But this early life came to grief. Desolate, he disappeared into the barren hills. There Li Pung found him years later, slowly planting shen trees, one by one, along the slopes. Small groves of young shen saplings had already started to grow, and Li Pung was surprised to find ground squirrels living among them, creatures that had not been seen in the land for many years. Tam Yang Bun would walk a few paces along the hillside and dig a hole with a quick *ching-ching* of his brass-tipped stick, dropping seedpods and moving on. He did this hour after hour, sunrise to sunset, stopping only occasionally for a moment's rest. Li Pung visited Tam Yang Bun and eventually came to help him. Over the years, as the trees grew, he noticed how life slowly returned to the land: first leafy thickets, then woodpeckers and wildcats. Through all the revolutions and upheavals in China, Tam Yang Bun continued his planting, until, decades later, the landscape around Feng Shr Li was once more a lush oasis, the people prospered and the dry riverbed flowed with water. In the end, Tam Yang Bun disappeared into the hills, but the narrator, searching for him, thinks he hears the tell-tale sound of his planting stick, *ching-ching*, still echoing in the distance.

That is another lovely story presented as a traditional Taoist tale and one that I remembered at least a decade after I read it. Why had I remembered it? And how had Maathai, instead of merely passing by such a story, managed to walk into it and come back bearing the planting staff of Tam Yang Bun?[4]

> *The very process of the restoring the land to health is the process through which we become attuned to Nature and, through Nature, with ourselves. Restoration forestry, therefore, is both the means and the end, for as we learn how to restore the forest, we heal the forest, and as we heal the forest, we heal ourselves.* — Chris Maser

An Australian, Tamsin Kerr, recently wrote a dissertation on the importance of story, metaphor and the wild.[5] He borrows the term *Trustori* (true-story) from an aboriginal story teller named Paddy Roe. *Trustori* is less about fact and more about metaphor and motivation. "Trustori relies upon creative imagination that uses story to get to the heart of an issue, only borrowing facts when they reinforce the message."[6] Kerr cites an example of a non-aboriginal *trustori* in the book *The Man Who Planted Trees*. It was written in 1953 by Jean Giono about the remarkable shepherd,

4 Jack Kornfield and Christina Feldman, *Soul Food: Stories to Nourish the Spirit and the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996), 29-39.

5 Tamsin Kerr, *Conversations with the Bunyip: The idea of wild in imagining, planning, and celebrating place through metaphor, memoir, mythology, and memory*, doctoral dissertation, Griffith University, July 2006. The bunyip, by the way, is a mysterious creature said to lurk in the Australian wilds, a spirit, a swamp monster, perhaps with a dog-like face, dark fur, a hose-like tail, flippers and walrus-like tusks or horns Kerr calls it the "land incarnate." It is a metaphor that haunts the collective imagination. Kerr writes: "No matter how pristine the wilderness or how concrete the urban, every region has its localized bunyip-equivalent that defines, and is shaped by, its community and their environmental relationships." In some sense, the monster reminds us that whether or not we come to terms with our environment, *it* will come to terms with us.

6 Kerr, *Conversations with the Bunyip*, 8.

Elzéard Bouffier, who spent his whole life planting acorns in the barren highlands of Provence, France, ultimately transforming these highlands into lush oak forests. The story continues to resonate with each succeeding generation and is now available in multiple formats including a children's book and video. It has inspired many to follow Bouffier's example, planting forests all over the world.

Only, it isn't true. It was almost immediately found out as a fabrication and denounced following its publication. There was no Elzéard Bouffier, no remarkable shepherd, no forest in Provence. Yet, as the writer's daughter notes, "Whenever his story has been published, people have believed in it."[7] The story is based on a meta-narrative that pops up in different places and time: the story of John Barleycorn in England, of Johnny Appleseed in America, of Kokopelli here in the native southwest. And, notes Kerr, it appears in a very similar Taoist tale included by Kornfield and Feldman in *Soul Food*, the story of Tam Yang Bun. If one tries to trace this story back to sources beyond that book, one quickly loses ones way in the gently swaying shen forest. There is no source cited. All that is left of Tam Yang Bun is a distant *ching-ching* fading into the distance.

But why bring all this up? After all, Bouffier and Tam Yang Bun might be characters of story, but there really was a Johnny Appleseed—or at least a fanatic Swedenborgian nurseryman named John Chapman (1774-1845) who really did plant apple trees. And Wangari Maathai certainly did receive a Nobel Peace Prize.

This is why I bring it up: we need to know how we know what to do. We need to know whether we are called to plant trees or whether we are called to cut them down, grind them up, and print these words on them. We need to know whether Wangari Maathai, in enacting *The Man Who Planted Trees* transformed that story into testimony and therefore calls out witness in us all.

> *Acts of creation are ordinarily reserved for gods and poets. To plant a pine, one need only own a shovel.*—Aldo Leopold

7 Aline Giono, quoted in Kerr, *Conversations with the Bunyip*, 8.

Luther is often quoted as having said: "If I believed the world were to end tomorrow, I would still plant a tree today." This is a wonderful quote. It is full of meaning, full of calling and implication, pregnant with moral significance, full of seed. It is a quote that makes one pause and reconsider one's relation to the world and to others. I've used it on the front of a calendar I printed, beneath a picture of a magnificent pine. My friends wrote how much they loved it.

Only… Luther never said it. Or, at least we have no evidence he ever said it. After assiduous research, Martin Schloemann concludes that there is no reliable record that Luther ever wrote or said any such thing.[8] Schloemann only concedes that it was the kind of thing Luther might have said, that it was, in beautiful German, "Luther gemäβ." Such a lovely word, "gemäβ," suggesting something in measure, in accord, in good order. It is a very Quakerly term. Quakers know that what we receive in faith is in accord, in good order, in measure.

At some level, the story of the saying that Luther never said remains true, remains gemäβ, despite the paucity of fact. And that, Kerr would say, is the very definition of a trustori.

> *The tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see Nature all ridicule and deformity, and some scarce see Nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, Nature is Imagination itself.*—William Blake

As Quakers, how do we know what is gemäβ and what is not? How do we argue what is right? Quakers love the phrase *"let your life speak"* as a way to convey the sense of life itself as testimony. We often attribute this phrase to George Fox, who, like Luther, never

8 Martin Schloemann, *Luthers Apfelbäumchen: Ein Kapitel deutscher Mentalitätgeschichte seit dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994) 246-251. The title in English would be roughly: *Luther's Little Apple Tree: a Chapter in the History of the German Mindset since the Second World War* I am indebted to Frederick J. Gaiser of Luther Seminary for his editorial comments in the Fall 2005 edition of *Word & World*. The editorial is available on-line at: http://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/25-4_Work_and_Witness/25-4_Editorial.pdf. last accessed: 1 April 2011.

quite said it. If we are to *let our lives speak*, how do we know what to say with them? And if Wangari Maathai's life *speaks*, are we *listening*?

The early Quakers saw themselves as living in the time of the Book of Revelation, as living into the Kingdom of God, at least in its first tentative expression here on earth.[9] So another way of asking the question is, how do we know what is Kingdom-gemäß?

We seem to have finally entered a time in the Western world when our relation to the environment is not treated as a fringe issue but as a core ethical and moral concern—a matter of life and death, therefore of faith. Many preachers, even in the most historically conservative churches, have seen the Light and jumped onto the haywagon.

But listening to Bible-based Christians trying to justify their newfound creation ethic, one detects a certain tension. There are only so many times one can quote Psalm 24:1.[10] Yes, there are a couple other hopeful sprouts among the biblical passages. For example, creation itself is "good" and "very good" in the first chapter of Genesis. Strictures in the Deuteronomic law call for saving trees (at least fruit trees) even when killing people.[11] Poetry of the prophets promises both man and land restored, and mythic trees stand tall at the beginning of the Bible in Eden and in the final revelation of the New Jerusalem.[12] But these trees don't seem like

9 c.f. Douglas Gwynn, *Apocalypse of the Word: The Life and Message of George Fox* (1624-1691) (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986) This remains, for me, a definitive text. Gwynn shows persuasively how early Quaker thought and action was shaped by the language of the Book of Revelation, Fox's own "openings" into this text, and the sense of Friends that they were active participants in the coming of the Kingdom.

10 Psalm 24:1 "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it." [NRSV] Christians, including Quakers, resort to this verse when seeking biblical sanction for environmental concerns. Friends Committee for National Legislation (FCNL) places it as the opening line of Part IV of their 2003 Policy Statement: "We seek an earth restored." The FCNL Policy Statement is available on-line at: http://fcnl.org/about/govern/policy/earth_restored/index.html. last accessed 1 April 2011.

11 Deuteronomy 20:19 : "If you besiege a town for a long time, making war against it in order to take it, you must not destroy its trees by wielding an axe against them. Although you may take food from them, you must not cut them down. Are trees in the field human beings that they should come under siege from you?"

12 The Tree of Life in Genesis 2-3 and Revelation 22. The latter echoes the prophet's Ezekiel's prophecy of trees and abundance in Ezekiel 47:7, 12.

the kind that require raking in the fall, nor give syrup in spring. The Bible is printed on the pulp of more tactile trees, and, on the whole, it isn't very green. So we argue about words, dominion versus stewardship, fallen and unfallenness. And Jesus spends his brief time on earth cursing fig trees as much as praising the lilies of the field.[13]

I think in this regard, Quaker tradition offers a better place to stand, because the Bible becomes a forest of witness in which one dwells rather than an oracle of stone which one consults. George Fox read the Bible and knew it very well. He struggled with it and lived into it and became notorious for his familiarity from cover to cover. But it was only after his revelation, his apprehension of Christ's *trustori*, that the Bible began to resonate and sing. When Margaret Fell heard Fox speak and was convinced, she did not remember line and verse, but his amazing call against those in the church who cited *only* line and verse: "You will say, 'Christ saith this, and the apostles say this;'" Fox demanded, "but what canst thou say?" It was this direct experience that forms the basis for his faith, and ours. First we see the forest; then we understand the trees, even the trees that have stood around us since before we were born, because they were planted by prophets long ago.

Thus Quaker faith relies on experience, not just our own experience but the experience of others who travel with us in the faith, not just now, but in other times and places. We rely on their lived stories as landmarks with which to orient, and we call these common and recurrent features of their lives, the testimonies.[14] Often we list these testimonies separately from the lives that witnessed to them, for example: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, and Stewardship. Recently we've detected other patterns in the landscape of these lives of faith such as Service

13 The fig tree withers in Mark 11 and Matthew 21. The lilies bloom in Matthew 6 and Luke 12.

14 The testimonies feature prominently in many books of Quaker Faith and Practice as well as in numerous articles and books about Quakers. The distinction between testimony as witness evident in lives versus doctrine or creed is not always well explicated, particularly in popular accounts; this is an unfortunate loss in terms of what Quakers offer to the wider faith community.

and Harmony with Nature.[15] We tend to collect and press these testimonies like leaves in our books of Faith and Practice. But when we list them, we run the danger of pretending that the leaves exist separate from the lives that bore them.

The testimonies aren't separable; they are fruits of one tree. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."[16] "Nothing?" we ask, horrified at the audacity of this assertion. We get so hung up on "nothing apart" that we forget the converse: that if we are *not* apart, *we can do something*.

> *As Americans, we have become comfortable with our environment of concrete, steel, plastics, and artificial fibers, colors, and flavorings to such a degree that many question whether or not we even need to focus on a relationship with the creation. We have lost the desire to seek God and the ability to see God in all things. And perhaps, we have closed our eyes to the importance of God's creation as expressed through the forests because we have substituted the wonders of human creation for the wonders of God's creation. This form of idolatry should concern us.* — Susan Drake

Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, Equality, Stewardship, Service, Harmony with Nature. The quintessential 18th century American Quaker, John Woolman, could not and did not contain his witness to only one testimony. They were all aspects of one story. While walking from Meeting to Meeting to witness against slavery, he also reflected on the impact of his life and business, his clothes and food. He felt concerns about war and conflict with the natives. He went to visit them. He gently nurtured both slave and slave holder back into community, serving both and paying both for

15 Quaker Earthcare Witness uses the testimonies to help define itself. It is a "spiritually-centered movement of Quakers and like-minded people seeking ways to integrate concern for the environment with Friends' long-standing testimonies for simplicity, integrity, peace and equality." They offer substantial amounts of related information on their website: http://www.quakerearthcare.org/.

16 John 15:5.

services rendered. He showed deep concern not just for the sailors' lives on board ship during his final journey to England, but even for the horses in cargo. In his *Journal* in 1772, Woolman called for an ethic of sustainability grounded both in faith and community: "The produce of the earth," he wrote, "is a gift from our gracious creator to the inhabitants, and to impoverish the earth now to support outward greatness appears to be an injury to the succeeding age."

John Woolman's life is but one witness. We have also the life of Wangari Maathai, who is neither Quaker nor shares John Woolman's scruples for plain dress and gentle speech. Yet in her life of *integrity*, we recognize a flowering of familiar testimonies — *stewardship, community, equality, simplicity, service, harmony with nature* — resulting in a Nobel Prize for that other familiar testimony, *peace*. Many others witness this truth to us, Quaker and non-Quaker, Western and non-Western, Christian and not. Behind their stories, we sense a common *trustori*. It is not many truths we seek. It is one truth expressed in many lives.

> *The environmental crisis is at root a spiritual and religious crisis; we are called to look again at the real purpose of being on this earth.* — London Yearly Meeting (Quaker Faith and Practice), 1988

In the gospels, Jesus asked his disciples to follow. The word has often been translated as "believe", but the two senses are inseparable in the original: belief is following. Faith is not a head game, but a willingness to walk along.

Jesus calls. The disciples follow. Sometimes in the space of a single verse, lives are undone and refashioned. Fishermen drop their nets and walk along. Some of them walk along to their death. Why? What did they *recognize* in Jesus' call? What story of a messiah did they hear in their youth? What tale of promise and renewal? Whose life testimony did they witness? What voice cried out in the wilderness, asserting audaciously that the promise was real?

Story and testimony. Tam Yang Bun plants in some distant land. Maathai plants here, now. One senses the sudden resonance, the recognition that we are witness not to story but to *trustori*. We sense the connection back to the root, to the vine. It is not the trees; we are the ones who need to be planted. Like the disciples we realize that we can, that we should, that we will drop our nets and walk into the Kingdom.

We come full circle. *The Man Who Planted Trees* has now been reissued in a new paperback edition complete with a foreword by Wangari Maathai.[17] Their stories merge. Elzéard Bouffier tends his flock and plants his acorns, Tam Yang Bun's stick sounds *ching-ching* in the shen tree covered hills above Feng Shr Li, and Wangari Maathai looks out from her office in Kenya. Their stories form one *trustori*, a *trustori* of life in abundance, hidden in plain view. It is the story of a forest that is now, yet not yet, because it awaits our planting. It is the testimony of life, community, health and wholeness arising from the grave of emptiness, sorrow and alienation. It is the leafing over of barren hills, the blooming after winter, weeds cracking through asphalt, resurrection. It is a very old *trustori* and one that disciples will recognize.

If we knew the world were going to end tomorrow, would we plant a tree today?

> *I wanted to start a national tree-planting day and I thought that Easter would be a wonderful time… I thought because people here are crazy about religion and Jesus and crucifixion, and to get the cross, somebody has to go into a forest, cut a tree and chop it up. So there would be nothing better for the Christians to do than to plant a tree and bring back life, like Christ came back to life.* —Wangari Maathai

17 Jean Giono, *The Man Who Planted Trees* (White River Jct., VT: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2007).

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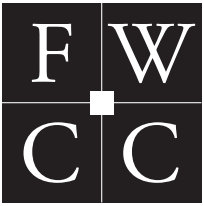

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The Fellowship was founded in 1936 by Rufus M. Jones, a North American Quaker teacher, activist and mystic, as a way for like-minded people who were interested in Quaker beliefs and practices to stay in contact with the Religious Society of Friends, while maintaining their own religious affiliation, if any. Today, WQF Fellows live in over 90 countries, and include non-Friends, inquirers, Quakers living in isolated circumstances, and active members and attenders of Friends meetings and churches. Wider Quaker Fellowship depends on the financial support of its readers to provide this service.

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