

# We Have Hope of What We are Doing

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At the beginning of a new year and a new decade, I want to offer some food-for-thought, inspiration and encouragement for 2% Per Year New Year's resolutions. I have been teaching and writing long enough to suppose that a reflective pause to take stock of where we've been and where we're going is a good investment. Specifically, I invite you to think about the following sequence: personal values and attitudes → environmental consciousness → informed decisions and deliberate actions → positive reinforcement → heightened awareness ...all leading to sustained improvements in the environment (and your health, wellness, and finances). I am also becoming somewhat self-conscious about writing a steady stream of detailed topical [..."you should do this, you should do that"] essays. If you have enjoyed and benefitted from reading the first four, that's great. I have eight more topics in mind: recycling steel cans, avoiding food waste, trees, composting, fixing things, lawns and gardens, managing household hazardous waste, and energy audits. They are drawn from personal experience, reflection, and study. Put another way, I think I should already be practicing whatever I preach. I'm planning to conclude the series with a reprise of the principles and practices we've explored.<sup>i</sup>

I also would like to inoculate our community from what seems to be a steady stream of hand-wringing, defeatism, and contradictory information in the popular press. I'm referring to those filler stories that authoritatively assert "it really doesn't matter what you try to do about climate change, because if you make one flight the benefit is erased." Wait, what? In the near term, that plane was going to fly that route whether you or I bought a ticket or not. If more people and organizations stopped buying tickets (i.e., took the train, used Skype, etc.), the airline would reduce their schedule. Would we accept the following parallel "logic"? "You can be very diligent with diet, exercise, and lifestyle choices and, in consequence, be healthy and active ...but still be involved in a car accident." The implication being, the injuries you may sustain in a serious accident somehow "erase" the benefits of a healthy lifestyle. I think health care providers would be quick to note that your recovery would be fostered if we were healthy and resilient if and when an accident occurred. The other common excuse is "why should I bother since no one else is doing it?" [Please.] As Wangari Maathai (2008) said "Sometimes you have to do the right thing, because it's the only thing to do."

I don't think anyone wakes up in the morning, pours their coffee, looks out the kitchen window and wonders "...what I can do to damage the environment today?" They may just be staring vacantly into the middle distance (at least until the coffee kicks in). They may be musing or worrying about many other things. They may be excited or apprehensive about what the new day will bring. They may just be bored, tired, or overworked. Let's give them the benefit of the doubt and call them "Group 1." Alternatively, "Group 2" may be dismissive of the environmental impacts their decisions and actions may cause as their day unfolds. The little voice in the back of their mind asks "are you sure this is OK? (e.g., dumping paint thinner down the drain, throwing batteries in the trash, buying and tossing single use plastics day after day, etc.) but that fleeting moment of hesitation passes and the small (yet cumulative) environmental impacts occur. Unfortunately, there is a small cohort of contrary people ("Group 3") who have never quite outgrown the "you can't make me [Care for Creation] if I don't want to" attitude of a petulant child. It will not be easy to influence this willful and stubborn group. Clearly, the most room for improvement lies with the benign, absent-minded folks (Group 1) and the "I don't really think it hurts anything" cohort (Group 2). We can begin this Creation Care project [...now, please don't take this the wrong way because it applies to me as well] by looking in the mirror. I'm certain neither you nor I begin the day intending to damage the environment. However, we simply may be too (Group 1) unaware, (Group 2) unconcerned, or (Group 3) hidebound and inflexible to meet daily challenges and embrace daily opportunities to reduce our ecological footprint and bring about positive, lasting change. I hope this 2% Per Year series and your own initiative and determination will help us to form and sustain a new awareness as the antidote to Group 1, 2, and 3 values, attitudes, and behaviors.

Some of you attended the screening and discussion of the award-winning documentary film by Lisa Merton and Alan Dater—*Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*<sup>ii</sup>—last June. (If more people are interested, I would be delighted to repeat the session.) Prof. Maathai (1940-2011) founded the Green Belt Movement<sup>iii</sup> (GBM) in 1977 to address the daunting (and inter-related) challenges associated with deforestation, soil erosion, chronic droughts, malnutrition, public health and community instability in Kenya. Her remarkable work was recognized with 19 prestigious international awards, including the Right Livelihood Award (1984), Goldman Environmental Prize (1991), Nobel Peace Prize<sup>iv</sup> (2004), and Indira Gandhi Award (2006). In one of the many memorable segments of the film—describing the GBM's civic and environmental education seminar—the instructor, Kinyanjui Kiumo, refers to the "Wrong Bus Syndrome." He pointedly asks the participants what they should do if they have lost their way or simply don't know what they are doing? ... "Just stay where you are until Jesus returns? So ...he will find you and deliver you from your suffering." Or, should they stop the bus, get off that "wrong

bus”, ask questions, work together, and find a new way to reach their intended destination? After the seminar one of the many enthusiastic participants said and did this...



After “Wrong Bus Syndrome” I have tried a lot to go and talk to other women, here and there ...to have groups. We try to encourage ourselves because if we don’t do that, our country will come to expire. Now we have courage against anything.

First we pray. Then we have hope of what we are doing. Then we do.

Anastasia Njeri, Sunshine Women’s Group, Kangari, Kenya, 2008

Should we wait for politicians to act ...for more catastrophic events ...for some mythical new technology to save us ...for artificial intelligence to tell us what to do? Make no mistake, global climate change and environmental degradation are existential threats. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want to be crying in my beer when Jesus returns or my grandson looks me in the eye and asks “Opa, what did you do?” Let’s get off the defeatist, do-nothing bus and adopt the GBM Sunshine Women’s Group’s philosophy ...even if we have to walk.

While we’re at it, perhaps Christ Church Cathedral and Diocese of Western Massachusetts could deliberately emulate the inspiring success of the Green Belt Movement. We won’t be planting 3 billion trees anytime soon, but we could embrace the the GBM’s guiding principles and timeless values.



**Vision** — A values-driven society of people who consciously work for continued improvement of their livelihoods and a greener, cleaner world.

**Mission** — We strive for better environmental management, community empowerment, and livelihood improvement using tree-planting as an entry point.

**Values** — (1) Love for environment conservation, (2) Self and community empowerment, (3) Volunteerism, (4) Accountability, transparency and honesty.

Finally, here are two book recommendations to inform our 2% journey—  
“**Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We’re in without Going Crazy**” (2012) by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone (New World Library, Novato, CA, 272 pages); Joanna Macy holds a Ph.D. in philosophy, is 90 years old, has published eight books, and is a widely traveled and influential speaker. Chris Johnstone is a physician and resilience expert in Scotland (formerly an addictions specialist with the UK Health Service). You *can* “judge this book by its cover” and use it to ...“transform despair and apathy, in the face of overwhelming social and ecological crises, into constructive, collaborative action.” They don’t mince words about the urgency of the situation but, at the same time, deliver active hope.  
“**Voluntary Simplicity**” (Second Edition, 2010) by Duane Elgin (Harper Collins, NY, 210 pages); Elgin writes that when the first edition was published in 1981, he was frequently introduced as “a Wharton MBA gone bad.” In 2005, at long last, he was introduced at an international business conference as “a Wharton MBA gone green.” In this thought-provoking book he discusses three forms of simplicity: (1) crude or regressive simplicity, (2) cosmetic or superficial simplicity, then focuses on (3) deep or conscious simplicity ... “a sophisticated and graceful way to live, work, and enjoy life.” Both books are favorites of the students in my Honors Seminar (“Voices of Conservation and Sustainability”). The syllabus and reading list can be found here: <https://eco.umass.edu/people/faculty/barten-paul/>



It is the people who must save the environment. It is the people who must make their leaders change. And we cannot be intimidated. So we must stand up for what we believe in.

Wangari Maathai, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, 2004

#### 2% Per Year List

1. Reusable shopping bags
2. Drive rationally
3. Don’t “burn” electricity
4. Be frugal
5. Active Hope
- 6.

<sup>i</sup> © January 2020

<sup>ii</sup> <https://takingrootfilm.com/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2004/maathai/lecture/>