Not for oneself, but for others: A tribute to Thomas E Lovejoy (1941–2021)

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Non sibi sed cunctis: Not for oneself, but for others. This is the motto of the Millbrook School, founded in 1931. It's the only school in the United States that has an accredited zoo (the Trevor Zoo), with an endangered-species breeding program that's run by specially-trained high school students.

Millbrook School is the *alma mater* of Thomas E Lovejoy (1941–2021). He was in the class of 1959, and while enrolled there he was the student head of the Trevor Zoo. Long after his graduation, Tom remained loyal to Millbrook.

Years later, at the public dedication of the Zoo's Environmental Education Center, in late September 1995, Tom said: "It is the failing of American education that by and large still produces a citizenry largely ignorant of the biology on which human existence depends. It is my personal view that the destructive behaviour of the current Congress with respect to the environment would be very different were there more widespread understanding of biology. It is this very understanding – through the wonder of living things – that we may begin to understand our own survival as dependent on the planet's biodiversity."

Tom was a mentor throughout my life's work as a forest ecologist, educator and explorer. After I had earned my doctorate in tropical ecology from Antioch University, I called Tom to ask his advice about my pending career choices. I told him that many of my colleagues were discouraging me from my love of teaching. Tom then highlighted his own situation regarding guiding famous politicians and musicians into the Brazilian Amazon; he mentioned that some called this "a waste of his time" as a world expert on biodiversity. Yet he understood that the impact of such influences could not be underestimated. Tom was able to reach the broader public with his urgent message about the biodiversity crisis, both through his work and through his influence on global leaders.

I often visited Tom at his home in McLean, Virginia, and at his various offices in Washington, DC. He was famously known for his holiday "Wassails" in his old log cabin home off Georgetown Pike. Politicians, conservationists and social activists attended. That's how we first met back in the 1990s. We settled into a private corner to talk about nature, teaching and my ecological work in Ecuador. At his request, I called him the next day, and that was when Tom told me about Millbrook, a small boarding school in New York's Hudson Valley with a zoo. The school was seeking a new Science Department Chairman. I went up for an interview and was hired. I worked at the school for 13 years, and throughout these years, Tom visited regularly as a member of the Board of Trustees, and as a friend.

Tom had an Oscar Wildean sense of humor. He always decorated the top branch of his dining room Christmas tree, not with a Christmas angel but with a Papua New Guinean *koteka*, or penis gourd. He was never disrespectful of others' spiritual practices, but Tom was an 'out of the box' character with an endearing and quirky sense of humour. He was also a dedicated naturalist and scholar. On the property of his McLean home compound was an entire building devoted to his personal library, some of which was also displayed in his living room around the fireplace. He loved collecting exquisite antiquarian natural history books.

Tom's prolific writing includes over 200 scientific articles and a host of books about the world's tropical rainforests, and about the connections between biodiversity and climate change. Indeed, Tom was a prescient science analyst of the impending adverse impacts of climate change on biodiversity – impacts we are seeing in our time. He was an early practitioner of the UN call for action: "Think globally, act locally." Tom's local actions included weekly attendance of spring and autumn weekend "Power Bird Walks." These occurred on the campus of Madeira School (next-door to his McLean home), and were led by his naturalist, bird photographer friends and teachers, John and Lee Trott, founders of the Burgundy Center for Wildlife Studies in West Virginia. Often attending those walks were renowned scientists and politicians, along with their students and community friends.

For Thomas E Lovejoy, the 'others' in the Millbrook School's motto included, as he liked to say, "all things, natural and free." As my mentor, Tom was stalwart and selfless in his support of my work and my students. Recently, Tom led a brief return expedition to his world-renowned research site in the Brazilian rainforest, taking one of my biology students as the new Headmaster at Millbrook School. The magic of Tom's generosity is guaranteed for this gem of an environmentally-active school for coming generations of environmental stewards.

When I learned about Tom's cancer, I called him immediately to express my concern and to thank him for his unflagging commitment to the Earth. The influence of this doyen of biodiversity will echo through the generations and guide the work of innumerable future conservationists.