

A Spirit Not to Be Quenched

Thomas Dudley Cabot Memorial Service

June 14, 1995

WE ARE HERE to remember and celebrate a remarkable person, and a remarkable life. Whether one knew Tom Cabot for only four years (as in my own case) or forty, or twice forty, the strength and vividness of the impression, and the depth of the effect, were similar: in half an hour, or half a century, one caught the spirit of all that persuasive energy, driving to explore and inquire, to advance the cause, to find out more – and then to act, and to make things better.

It takes a special genius to understand a university, and especially to know how to work with a university, and through it, and on behalf of it. When the institution happens to be Harvard, even more than genius is required. Tom had all the requisite capacities: he created an inimitable role, and an irreplaceable place, among us.

He was our local neighbor, and Harvard became, so to speak, his other address. In the best possible way, he was ubiquitous. Once last year, he turned up in New York, during the worst moment of the worst of winters, for a meeting whose only purpose was to offer advice about the design of the University's campaign bro-

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chure. And at the end of the meeting, having made the journey, he turned to me and said: "Well, you have to have one of those things, but nobody will read it, and it won't raise a dime for you."

Not long afterward, he showed up at our Museum of Comparative Zoology for the celebration of the birthday of a much younger man, the great evolutionary theorist Ernst Mayr, who was just turning ninety.

Wherever something interesting was happening at Harvard, whenever something could be learned, or wherever something useful could be done – in the sciences, or university finance and operations, or undergraduate education, or public health, or the affiliated hospitals – Tom would be there, our Ambassador for Scientific and Medical Affairs, and our unofficial Vice President for Detectable Results.

I have never known an alumnus who was more deeply identified with the daily life and welfare of a university than Tom was with Harvard. That is the record. It will not be easily matched, and certainly never surpassed.

He relished his time with us, and we in turn have relished his presence.

He would not have wanted us to sentimentalize him at this moment.

He would have wanted us to recall that he was not always the soul of reticence – and he had little patience with the conventions of any society that practiced politeness while actually neglecting courtesy. True courtesy of the heart, a sense of unadorned but fitting ceremony, of appropriate deeds and demanding duties – these were his habits, his forms, his own social conventions; so much his own, that he was everywhere himself, everywhere the same, whether at home, or in town, or in the Yard just outside.

Add to these qualities his pleasure in the smallest trace of active intelligence, and his willingness to engage with anyone, on any plausible terms, so long as there was something potentially interesting or useful in the encounter: add all these, and we cap-

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ture at least part of this vital, open, voyaging, and pioneering person – a person of strong devoted feelings, and deep loyalties. That was Tom: a spirit not to be quenched, either in fact or in our memory.

“If the salt [of the earth] has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?”

We have now lost a portion of that precious salt. And as we look to the years ahead, we must somehow find (for Tom’s sake as well as our own) the savour that he has always been at hand to provide.