

**Want to Change the World?**



# **Want to Change the World?**

**Accelerate Your  
Nonprofit or Cause**

**Tom Peterson**

**Stakeholder Press**

BOOKS TO MAKE THE WORLD BETTER

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Tom Peterson  
cosmorock.org

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To **you**...

who obviously answered **Yes** to the book title  
because you are now reading this.

Thanks for engaging in your  
patch of world change!

And to **Walt** and **Eliot**



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## Audacious agency

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As Doug Tallamy headed off to college his older brother told him, “Don’t take any science because you’re not smart enough for it.” He took the advice for a year, but couldn’t resist trying biology as a sophomore. He liked it. In his junior year, he signed up for an entomology class from, and this is true, Dr. Bugby, and Tallamy has been captivated by insects ever since. He went on to get his doctorate and has taught at the University of Delaware for four decades. In 2000, Tallamy and his wife moved to a house in Oxford, Pennsylvania with a ten-acre lot that had once been farmland. Because it hadn’t been mowed for three years, invasive plants had taken over. “The entire ten acres looked like Sleeping Beauty’s castle,” Tallamy told me. “You couldn’t walk anywhere.” So the two of them began cutting trails through the property.

One day Tallamy noticed something. As an entomologist he looks for insects all the time, and you find them, he says, by seeing feeding damage on leaves. So it was what he was *not* seeing that caught his attention. “There weren’t any holes on the invasive plants, but there were several on the natives that were there.” Tallamy realized this would make an interesting study: Why

weren't insects eating any of the invasive plants? There happened to be an undergraduate looking for a project. Her first assignment was to go to the literature to see what had already been done about measuring insect impacts on native and non-native plants. A couple days later she reported that she couldn't find anything. Well, she's an undergrad, thought Tallamy, so he looked himself. He couldn't find anything either, concluding "There's a big, long list of why invasive plants are not good for ecosystems, but wrecking the food web was not on it." A food web shows how every being on the planet (animals, plants, fungi, bacterium) impacts its habitat—it's all about food chains and who eats what.

So Tallamy and his colleagues got some grants and began to study how big a problem invasive plants were. They learned that more than 80 percent of the plants in residential neighborhoods are non-native. "It all came together that this is a major cause of bird declines, insect declines, and biodiversity declines in general," he said, "not just in this country, but around the world." Meanwhile, Tallamy began getting invited to give talks at bird clubs and garden clubs. Because many in the audience asked for more information, he started out to make a pamphlet, which turned into the book *Bringing Nature Home*. While researching for the book, Tallamy came across the statistic that there were forty million acres of lawn in the United States—an area the size of New England. *That's a lot of lawn*, he thought. *What would happen if we cut it in half?* When he added up the areas of the major national parks it still wasn't twenty million acres. So he said, "Let's create a national park at home by reducing lawns. We'll call it Homegrown National Park. So I started putting that in my talks and I talked about it for years and years."

To describe the beginnings of a movement, Derek Sivers once showed a three-minute amateur video to a TED-talk audience.<sup>1</sup> It starts out with a shirtless young man dancing and waving his arms at an outdoor rock concert. He's surrounded by a crowd sitting on a grassy slope listening to the music being played down the hill.

After a while, a second guy gets up and starts to dance with him. This second guy calls to his friends to join and before long most of the audience is dancing. “Leadership is over-glorified,” said Siverson. “Yes, it was the shirtless guy who was first and he’ll get all the credit, but it was really the first *follower* that transformed the lone nut into a leader... If you really care about starting a movement, have the courage to follow and show others how to follow.” Enter Tallamy’s first follower: Michelle Alfandari. For more than thirty years, Alfandari had run a New York City-based licensing and marketing agency, serving a mix of global corporate and nonprofit clients. She had no interest in gardening but had inherited a garden when she and her husband moved from The City to Sharon, Connecticut. In 2017, a neighbor suggested she go hear Tallamy talk at a local event. On that rainy day, she noticed that the audience was packed with gardeners and landscape designers hanging on to Tallamy’s every word. “I was learning that there’s this biodiversity crisis due to loss of habitat *and* there’s a solution,” Alfandari told me. “As a marketing person, I’m getting excited—not like everyone else in the audience saying, ‘Oh, we’ll replace that burning bush with this or that.’ I saw what we call the white space, an unarticulated need that represents an opportunity.”

Alfandari kept thinking about it, and in 2019, reached out to Tallamy. They agreed to meet at an upcoming symposium. “You know, you only talked to the choir,” she told him when they got together. “Yeah, it’s only the choir who invites me,” he quipped. She went on, “But this isn’t going to work unless you get beyond the choir.” She was not the first person to approach Tallamy saying, “Wow, we’ve got to get the word out.” Always booked, he said he didn’t have the time, and even though Alfandari had recently committed to slowing down her work pace, together, they decided to create Homegrown National Park.

Enter *more* followers...and you have a movement. A few months ago, a note printed on a half-page of paper showed up in

my mailbox: “Hi neighbor! This fall, I’m asking you to *leave the leaves!* Leaves are not litter—they’re food and shelter for butterflies, beetles, bees, moths and more.” The neighbor went on to describe how Luna moths and swallowtail butterflies use the leaves for shelter from predators. She listed a few things we could do and gave her email address and a website where we could learn more. That’s how I learned about Homegrown National Park.

## Acting audaciously

Are we now living in the prequel to a dystopian future? It’s a turbulent time, a make-or-break time. A recent UN report called it “a code red for humanity” and warns that “the alarm bells are deafening, and the evidence is irrefutable: greenhouse-gas emissions from fossil-fuel burning and deforestation are choking our planet and putting billions of people at immediate risk.”<sup>2</sup> And then there’s the wealth gap: Oxfam reports that just ten men—including Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Bill Gates—have more combined wealth than the poorest three billion people on Earth. Autocrats are on the rise and democracy is under existential threat in the United States and around the world. Meanwhile, people of all types need help right now in every community. And billions of the poorest people struggle routinely for water, food, decent housing, and decent work. Add to that war, refugees, and a global pandemic.

Years ago, I came across a question. I can’t remember who asked it, but it was about global poverty. It could just as easily have been asked about the disappearing species, mass shootings, the opioid epidemic, or the relentless assault on public schools. It could have been about the rise of fascism, racism, or the many other faces of injustice. Here’s the question: *What insanity makes us think this is not our problem?* It’s true. All of these challenges belong to us. They are ours. We either see their urgency and get to work... or we are truly mad. We are at that critical point where we either push hard enough to pass a better world to our children or we fail

them. Fortunately, on this very day, millions of concerned citizens of the world are hard at work saving everything from wolves to voting rights. We are more organized and smarter than ever. But to prevail, we will have to accelerate world change.

In 1959, Martin Luther King, Jr., visited the two-story building in Mumbai (then Bombay) that had served as Mahatma Gandhi's home and headquarters during the struggle for Indian independence. His room has been preserved, and from behind a partition, visitors can see that it's mostly empty but for a sleeping mat, spinning wheels, and a few objects. King went to the building as part of a trip to India to learn more about Gandhian principles. His visit to that room is described in *CounterPunch*<sup>3</sup> by historian Vijay Prashad, director of Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research:

He was moved by the space where Gandhi sat, now cordoned off from the public. King wanted to go and sit in the room, among Gandhi's remaining objects. The Museum's curator was hesitant, but could not refuse a State guest. King meditated on the floor, where Gandhi once did. Hours went by. The curator asked King's companions when they planned to leave, since he had to close the Bhavan. King asked if he could stay the night, by himself, and sleep where Gandhi had slept. The curator, once more, had to allow his guest this privilege. King did so, to the discomfort of his friends.

The next morning, King wrote in the guest book, "To have the opportunity of sleeping in the house where Gandhiji slept is an experience that I will never forget."

King's bold request took his experience of Gandhi's room to a different level. This same boldness showed up in his dreams for the world and in how he fought for his vision. "I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits."

The need today for bold action is stark, and our urgent challenges demand more than half-hearted actions. The meek have never changed the world. While few of us are as bold as Martin Luther King, Jr., we are all called to be more audacious. It took audacity for Doug Tallamy and Michelle Alfandari to launch Homegrown National Park. And it took audacity for my neighbor to place that note on ninety front doors asking us to let our yards look a little messier for the good of tiny critters we seldom think about.

## A life's purpose

"The two most important days in your life are the day you are born and the day you find out why."

—Mark Twain

"What do I want to do with my life?" is such a simple question. But it's one many of us struggle to answer. Socrates spent his days like a gadfly challenging citizens in the gathering places of Athens about their tightly held beliefs. He would ask them *Why?* He held that "an unexamined life is not worth living." So, how's your "examination" going? Do you know your purpose? Of course, we all have more than one. A parent's is to raise their children well. For a time, your purpose may be to care for an ailing relative or friend. But, we're talking about something different here: that special calling or vocation. Some people seem to know what that is from birth. Others choose simply to wander, and do so in a wonderful way. But like many, you may be trying to discover a purpose. This search could unfold over the course of months or a lifetime of years. It may be better thought of not as a buried treasure to be found (although that does happen), but rather as a garden to cultivate. What's your dream for your life's work? What gives it meaning? If your monthly expenses were covered, what would you do? How could the world be different, better, because of you?