Leadership Essay  
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Throughout this past quarter, I have had the privilege of listening to individuals, who in their own right have made a mark in history, recall stories and reminisce a little about serving in the public sector with Governor Dan Evans. I enjoyed the classes immensely because these were opportunities to learn about someone I only knew as the person the University of Washington honored by identifying his name, image and legacy to the Public Affairs program. Throughout this quarter as I have listened to the panelists and Governor Dan Evans, I have given serious thought about what I believe leadership excellence to be, and I have come to the following opinions and conclusion.

It is a way of thinking about people, organizations and taking effective action. It is a way of understanding the stream of events and discerning the best ways to make a difference. Successfully handling difficult choices and tough situations with discernment and skill is the result of handling the small and obscure and learning from those situations. These visionary leaders make a difference behind the scenes when at times nobody seems to be noticing. And, of course, they make a difference during times when it seems all eyes are on that one individual person. The important characteristic in this sort of leadership is passion – passion about the work, the people and the future. Governor Dan Evans demonstrated this passion. I could hear it in his voice and I could see it in his face when he spoke about his experiences regarding the development of The Alternatives for Washington Project, the formation of the Evergreen State College, the initiation of environmental issues and his course of action during the tumultuous times of the Civil
Rights Movement and Vietnam years. He is a leader who served and continues to lives his life with passion and the desire to make a difference in the lives of individuals and in the life of government.

Another very important aspect about leadership is discernment, as this requires patience, caution and insight to understanding a problem or situation. Without discernment, it becomes difficult for a leader to drill down into a problem and make solid decisions to move a problem or situation forward. Governor Dan Evans practiced discernment. He successfully maneuvered the political scene and difficult times using caution, discernment and wisdom. The story of how he faced thousands of anxious citizens upon his return from an extended overseas trip during the Vietnam years gives evidence to this skill. When he arrived home, countless letters and communiqué from impatient citizens asking for answers and immediate control of university students shown by local news destroying the city of Seattle met him. What did he do?

Through discernment and the application of wisdom, he drilled down into the problem, discovered the reality of the situation and approached the public of anxious citizens with answers and reassurance. He took the time to look at the situation and at the bigger picture so that he could thoughtfully and honestly approach the residents of Washington State. Had he reacted to the situation and requested immediate lock downs upon his arrival home, greater challenges would have appeared and a plethora of mistakes would have unfolded. Because he bought some time to surmise the situation, he could address the situation and the public in ways that instilled some semblance of peace. He reassured
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December 8, 2005

the citizens of Washington State that they were not in any kind of danger or that the city of Seattle was not at risk to being destroyed.

Exemplified in the public service life of Gov. Evans, a leader is someone who is a realist or sees the world through a kaleidoscope or views the world as it is – full of all sorts of people who act for all sorts of reasons. Throughout his leadership, he allowed space for people to act and events to unfold in ways that might have surprised him, might even disappoint his expectations or astound him. He demonstrated that discernment is crucial when presented with a situation or problem in which one moves with caution, plans for unforeseen events and ensures all the bases are covered to protect him and the values he cherished.

Being a realist did not preclude him from serving as a visionary leader. Real vision and true visionaries can lift individuals out of the muck and mire and into the higher realms of human potential and possibility. A visionary leader awakens and directs the inner strength of people to keep moving forward, to not retreat or stand frozen in time. A visionary leader envisions another possibility and instills the possibility of that hope.

Dan Evans, as Governor and US Senator, was the visionary who spread the seeds of that vision – those possibilities – so that they might take root in others and find their way into our common reality.

Excellence in leadership subscribes one to being a realist, a visionary and a discerner. It also includes a high standard of ethics in life, in word and in deed. During my last class
with Governor Evans and the three panelists, this point was sharpened. Each person spoke about Governor Evans’ honesty as a public leader because he never wanted to deceive and felt responsible for presenting the truth and instilled this quality in the people who served with him. People are not usually derailed from top leadership positions because of a lack of technical competence or conceptual skills but mostly from a lapse of judgment and question of character. Each time we listen to the news or open a newspaper we learn about the latest corporate or government scandal. The pages of history demonstrate the carnage of such leadership. Governor Evans did not lead a perfect public service life but he did serve with ethics.

Governor Dan Evans is a fine example of a public figure who served the people of Washington Stage as a realist and a visionary through passion, discernment and ethics. I now understand more fully why the University of Washington named the Public Affairs graduate program after this individual. He is a distinguished citizen. His public service record speaks for itself and continues to inspire others. Connecting his name and legacy with the Public Affairs program conveys its role and mission and serves as an archetype for the school’s aspirations to uphold integrity, respect and excellence.