“A good teacher is a good learner.”
Judge Don Horowitz speaking about Dan Evans, December 1, 2005

“This was a new situation for me, and I quickly realized I had a lot to learn.
I did a lot of listening.”
Governor Dan Evans

I have been struck by how many times Governor Evans has said this during class, and appreciate his spirit of appreciative inquiry. It seems the most important ingredient, among many, in his successful career of public leadership. A number of speakers who joined the seminar during the quarter mentioned the Governor’s commitment to learning, with one observing that Governor Evans “has one of the most open and inquiring minds” he has ever encountered. This commitment to be open and flexible about new learning when adjusting to a new a different institution is well in evidence in every stage of his career that we were privileged to visit as students of effective leadership.

Despite working with Dan Evans in different settings and at different times in his career, seven leadership traits were mentioned over and over by his colleagues:

- Knowledge
- Inclusiveness
- Integrity
- Trust
- Vision (projecting a clear agenda and following through)
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- Openness
- Courage

Of all of these, the ability and desire to [listen and] understand the experience of others is one of two qualities I would most like to emulate on my own leadership path. The second quality is the Governor’s gift for another important aspect of leadership: the capacity to engage the public. I found myself returning to the very first reading of the class, the synopsis of the Alternatives for Washington process, several times during the quarter. This was just one of many ways Governor Evans supported public participation. His commitment to “broadly engage the citizens of the state” was evident in each of the topic areas we considered, and a particularly inspiring vision in this more fragmented era of civic participation. Could this “living program” template, honoring both the “process and the product,” be one legacy of Dan Evans, and somehow recreated now?

Further illustrating his commitment to collaborative decision-making, the Governor shared an important lesson he had learned early in his public career: “If you want someone with you at the landing, you better make sure they are with you when you take off.”

As a carpentry student whose instructor is constantly admonishing us to make sure everything is “plumb, level, and square,” I have concluded that this is an appropriate analogy to the Governor’s career. An impeccable sense of ethics, high regard for truth and transparency, and facility with a slide rule form a three-legged stool of sorts. The latter, the importance of
knowing your budget, has been much emphasized in another management course I took this quarter, and I see this as a crucial commitment for a leader to make. I enjoyed learning about the Governor’s commitment to delving into the numbers behind the policies to ensure equality and fairness in policy initiatives, thinking carefully about impacts and guided by the questions “What are we really spending?” and “What does the public really want?” Attention to detail engendered by his engineering background served him well, leading him to consider, “What does the end need to look like, where do I need to get to, and where are the load points?”

Crosby and Bryson, in Leadership for the Common Good, identify an important task of visionary leadership: “seize the opportunity to be an interpreter and direction giver in a situation of uncertainty and difficulty.” Dan Evans provided a clear and compelling example of this when he recounted his response to the 1970 student demonstrations. He calmly gathered information from the local station that had broadcast incendiary footage, and immediately went on the air, unscripted, to deliver information to the public in a reassuring way that acknowledged the uncertainty felt by the different sides. His excellent communication skills allowed him to quickly assess the situation, place the day’s events in context in a way that was accessible to viewers and conveyed empathy for multiple points of view, and reinforced the value of the ability of all citizens to “express their opinions clearly within the political framework . . .we would all like to work within.”

In a recent interview, Virginia Anderson, director of the Seattle Center since 1988, said, “[Leadership] is about service, not self service.” I think this applies well to the Governor’s
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leadership style. When I mentioned to a fellow bus rider on my morning commute that I was
taking this class, not a small number of people sitting around us chimed in to say, “You know, 
Dan Evans was the only Republican I ever voted for,” and “Why can’t we have more leaders like Dan 
Evans?” I found myself asking that same question after every class session.