

**Speech by Mark Dayton, former Governor of Minnesota, to Executive MPH  
Program students in January 2021**

What an extraordinary time to be involved in public health. I am honored to speak before you, who have committed your own lives to save the lives of others.

You are involved in life-changing events, which will shape the future of crucial elements in public health, such as patient care, providers' protections, and racial disparities in care and quality. You will look back on this chapter of your lives as one with enormous consequences for you and everyone around you.

My life and career were shaped by their own life-changing events. I grew up in a socially sheltered environment in Long Lake, Minnesota and went to college in 1965, untouched by the events bursting around me in my country and world.

My first two years of college were devoted to pre-med studies and varsity hockey. But those drastic external events were penetrating my consciousness, first from afar, then from up-close.

My first political hero was Senator Robert Kennedy, who was running for President in the spring of 1968. I supported him over the two Minnesota candidates, because not only did he oppose the Viet Nam war, but he also had a deep commitment to social and economic justice. He truly cared about people, who were ignored by most politicians.

In June, I returned home from college, just before the night of the California Primary. My parents, Richard Nixon Republicans, didn't like the Kennedys and went to bed, so I watched the returns on TV alone, in the basement. I saw Senator Kennedy thank the crowd for his dramatic victory and close with, "And now, it's on to Chicago," the site of the Democratic National Convention.

I leaned forward to turn off the TV, when suddenly, before my eyes, he was lying on the floor in a pool of blood. I watched that scene replayed many times during the next few days. It was profound and life-changing for me. Seeing my political hero die for the causes he believed in, lit a spark in me; and I could never be comfortable, being comfortable in my parents' comfortable home, again.

I returned for my senior college year in the fall of 1968, withdrew all of my applications to medical school, and became active in the anti-Viet Nam War movement. Eventually, I earned the distinction of being the only Minnesotan on President Richard Nixon's infamous "Enemies List." I felt the heavy hand of concentrated political power on my shoulder. I was audited annually by the IRS, hauled before a federal Grand Jury, wiretapped, and unconstitutionally hounded by my Draft Board.

The Watergate hearings, leading to President Nixon's resignation and Vice President Agnew's "Nolo Contendere", drew me into mainstream politics. I felt so vindicated to realize that I was not an unlawful and un-American villain; Richard Nixon and his cronies were the crooks. I began to feel that perhaps --- just perhaps -- there was a path for me in the larger political realm. It was the path I have followed.

I have struggled to decide what I should try to pass on to you. Most of you have chosen your career paths, have achieved initial successes, and are now working in the midst of a world-wide public health catastrophe. Meanwhile, I am retired and sitting on the sidelines. I should be taking notes from you! But what principles can endure, from one generation to the next?

I became friends with Senator Edward Kennedy early in my political career, when I was one of three Minnesota co-chairs of his 1980 try for the Presidency. That meant I was working to defeat not only the incumbent President, Jimmy Carter, but his Vice President, Walter Mondale, on whose Minnesota Senate staff I had worked for two years.

Both Mondale and Kennedy remembered my actions for a long time. I don't know, if Fritz has ever forgiven me. But Ted welcomed me as a friend.

In 1988, he invited me to a weekend with a small group at his summer compound in Hyannisport, Massachusetts. After dinner, he asked me to take a walk with him along the ocean beach. He wanted to find out whether I was still interested in seeking public office. I had gone through several setbacks since my losing campaign for the US Senate in 1982, including a divorce and residential treatment for alcoholism.

I wish I could remember the exact words he used that night. But I'll never forget his message. He said that perseverance is the prerequisite for success in politics (and probably in most of life's big challenges). It would not guarantee success; but it was a prerequisite for success. You have to rise above your defeats and setbacks and carry on. As Winston Churchill once said, "When you're going through Hell, keep on going." And then, "Never give in. Never, never, never, never . . . ."

I've had plenty of opportunities to put this advice into practice. I ran for Governor in 1998, and finished fourth in the DFL Primary. People told me my political career was over. Two years later, I won the DFL Primary for the US Senate by over 20 points and defeated the Republican incumbent in the general election.

But I was mostly miserable in the Senate, being in the minority and starting 100<sup>th</sup> in seniority. I did have a few sterling moments, such as being one of just 23 Senators to vote against the Iraq War resolution and one of only 11 to vote against Condoleeza Rice's confirmation as Secretary of State. That night on The Daily Show, John Stewart ran the clip of my saying I had been lied to by Ms. Rice and quipped, "New to Washington, are we Senator?"

But I lost my close friend of twenty years, Senator Paul Wellstone, his wife and daughter, and another good friend, Mary McEvoy, in a terrible plane crash. I had little effect on major events. I did not seek re-election, and I left the Senate in despair.

Then, in 2010, I decided to persevere again and ran for Governor. I defeated the DFL Party's endorsed candidate by 1 & 1/2 percent in the primary and the Republican by 3/4<sup>th</sup> of one percent in the general. I then had the tremendous opportunity to serve for eight years, as the Governor of Minnesota.

Sometimes, perseverance pays.

A second prerequisite for success in public life is believing in something and then convincing other people. "Nothing convinces like conviction," someone said, and she was right.

Vision is a badly overused word. Even without a genuine epiphany, however, you still need to believe in something. And if it's a big something, you're going to be attacked for it. You have to believe it, believe in it, and believe in yourself.

Now some politicians, including superficially successful ones, believe that conviction is not a prerequisite to success; in fact, it is a barrier. Better to profess a belief in whatever is popular, or politically advantageous, and keep climbing higher.

That doesn't meet my definition of success. Look at the Republicans in the US Senate. Most of them have been willing to sell their principles to save their careers. Over 100 Republican House members voted to invalidate an honest, honorable national election.

I really don't know how they can live with themselves, how they can look themselves in the mirror. Unless they're psychopathic, which is actually a reasonable guess with some of them, there must be a twinge of conscience somewhere inside.

By contrast, in October 2002, two weeks before the mid-term election, George Bush and Dick Cheney engineered a Senate vote, to give them a blank check to go to

war against Saddam Hussein. Polls showed that 80 percent of Minnesotans wanted to believe their President, and supported President Bush.

Senator Paul Wellstone, facing a close re-election battle, nevertheless voted against that Senate resolution to authorize an Iraq War. One of just 23 Senators to oppose it, he was the only incumbent facing reelection to show that extraordinary courage and integrity.

The last time I saw Paul was on the Senate floor, right after we had adjourned, just two days before his death. He was ebullient. His latest poll showed him leading his Republican opponent by six percent! Even Minnesotans, who disagreed with him, respected his courage and integrity.

My only consolation in the horrible tragedy to befall him, is that Paul died, certain that he would win reelection.

But to have a chance to prevail, perseverance and conviction must be accompanied by genuine passion. Passion fuels the flame that propels you forward, empowers you to rebut the naysayers, and carry the day. Voters or colleagues are always asking themselves, "Do you really meant it."

To be persuasive, you have to really believe in what you are espousing; you have to really care about the outcome; and you have to show your passion to those, who are watching from the sidelines.

President Theodore Roosevelt, one of four Presidents deemed worthy of immortality on Mount Rushmore, captured that essence of passion.

He said, "The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, comes up short again and again,

but who does actually strive to do the deeds;

Who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, and spends himself in a worthy cause;

Who, at best, knows the thrill of high achievement,  
and who at worst, if he fails, at least fails daring greatly,  
so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls,  
Who know neither victory nor defeat.”

Perseverance, conviction, and passion need one more special ingredient. Courage. The courage to stand up and speak out. The courage to risk promotions, even careers, because you are convinced that you are right.

250 years ago, Edmund Burke said, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”

Dr. Anthony Fauci is a living example of someone, who knew he was right. But that wasn't enough. He also had the courage to stand up to the President of the United States, and tell him that he was wrong. His courage saved many lives.

“In whatever area in life one may meet the challenges of courage, whatever may be the sacrifices she faces if she follows her conscience - the loss of her friends, her fortune, her contentment, even the esteem of her fellows and followers - each man must decide for himself the course he will follow. The stories of past courage can define that ingredient - they can teach, they can offer hope, they can provide inspiration. But they cannot supply courage itself. For this each of us must look into our own soul.”