



Now I Get Minnesota

Before the death of their beloved Senator, Paul Wellstone, I could not understand Minnesotans. And it was not just that there is not a state more far away from Southern California in practically every way.

Before the death of Senator Wellstone, I visualized Minnesota as a land of ice fishing codgers, funny accents, prairie dogs, homesteaders and trees—cranky, picaresque and green, as in plants, not Ralph Nader.

Before the death of Senator Wellstone, most of us smug sun drenched political intellectuals thought Minnesota voters lost their minds when they elected a steroidal lose cannon World Wrestling Federation Governor four years ago.

The place that produced civil rights progressives like Hubert Humphrey and Eugene McCarthy and the ever-ready battery candidate Harold Stassen during a time when politics was about beliefs, not media hype, defied the polls to elect the anti-government media meister, Jesse “The Body” Ventura.

I just could not get Minnesota, until now.

I did not even get Minnesota when I met Senator Wellstone in 1995 at the start of a slug-fest campaign season. He came to San Diego to raise money for the National Jewish Democratic Council at a time when Democrat was still just a four letter word here.

For one thing, this tweedy Minnesota guy, still marching on the heels of Bobby Kennedy, was a throwback to a UC Berkeley thirty years ago—a deeply committed unabashed Liberal, he might as well have been wearing a sports jersey adorned with a giant gold “RFK” decal. For another, he was enjoying himself.

There he was, in conservative La Jolla, challenging with elfish glee a bunch of beaten down deal making Democrats, whose local leadership had decided years ago to go-along-to-get along with the overwhelming Republican majority just for a nibble at the downtown table.

With puckish zeal, he asked all of us to think about why we got involved in politics in the first place. In classic California fashion, I was too busy working the crowd to think about anything deeper than finding volunteers and campaign contributors.

That this fully ethnic guy preaching social justice hailed from Lake Wobegon was so dissonant to this born and bred urban “coastie,” I forgot the whole evening until the ghastly news about a plane crash outside Eveleth started dripping in on CNN.

It should have been more obvious that Minnesotans are a different species than the rest of us when their baseball team, the Twins, responded to Baseball Czar Bud Selig’s invitation to extinction by almost making it to the World Series.

Now, that is spit-in-your eye underdog grit. San Diego’s Padres would have hired a public relations firm.

The national outpouring of grief for Wellstone, considered a great guy but politically marginal, centered less about the particulars of his politics but about his style—passionate, principled and profound.

Garrison Keillor, Minnesota’s radio connection to the rest of the world, said in an October 25 statement published on the Internet:

“Everybody who knew him has a clear picture of him, bouncing around, jabbing, saying his piece, standing up for the underdog and the unspoken-for. A lot of people voted for him who didn’t really agree with him — they just liked him so much.”

So now I get Minnesota.

This is a state that elects people not simply for the content their convictions but because they have them. Right, Left, Center or off-the-wall, their politicians had better be real.

When Wellstone, alone among Senators in tight reelection campaigns, voted against giving vast war powers to a popular president, his poll numbers went up, not because his constituents necessarily agreed with him, but because he proved himself a man of principle.

As it is election time once again, I spent some time on a Wellstone hunt among candidates on this years’ local ballot, putting aside what they stood for, just that they did stand for something with passion.

There was plenty of competency talk—conversations, email and campaign literature read like corporate resumes, positions carved out of the politics of the Book of Blah Blah. No wonder I am dragging myself to the polls this year.

In all fairness, being Paul Wellstone in the San Diego region is not high on the electability scale. Fire breathers need not apply. Look at the very popular Mayor of San Diego, the Duke of Dull.

Tax Collector Bart Hartman’s office antics with female staff might be colorful, but cost the County \$100,000 to settle the sexual harassment lawsuit. This is not the kind of passion I was looking for.

And District Attorney Paul Pfingst, the object of the nastiest negative campaign in memory, is taking it big time for having a personality at all.

But, maybe our love of laconic is why our government institutions actually function pretty well—Wellstone’s can be expensive. Minnesota has one of the highest tax rates in the country.

Del Mar’s Crystal Crawford, running for reelection to the City Council, is an example of San Diego style politics in the best sense of the term— quietly competent, effectively protective of her community and willing to stand up to the Big Brothers to the north and south of her town on environmental issues.

But, this week I kept thinking that little more Wellstone in the water could do us all some good.

As a result of this tragedy, the politics of independent thinking, deeply felt conviction and concern for the underdog got a run of good press.

It has been a pleasure finally getting to know Minnesota. Thank you, Senator Wellstone.