

Wellstone's anger was perfect fuel

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*Politics is what we create by what we do,
what we hope for,
and what we dare to imagine.*

-- Paul Wellstone

One day when I was feeling particularly defeated (for what reason I now forget) I asked Paul what kept him going -- where did he find in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds his almost inexhaustible energy to keep on trying anyway.

I expected a nod, a joke or a pep talk. Instead, Paul paused, stared at me with his intense gaze and said "Anger, Erik. I'm angry that it doesn't have to be this way."

There is a lot to be angry about these days. Corporate greed. Economic and social injustice. The shredding of our social safety net for the most vulnerable in our society. A growing arrogance of power and nationalistic myopia. An assault on our democratic liberties. Economic values that increasingly pit profits against workers and our families and communities.

People should be angry. Very angry.

But there is danger in being angry. Today there also seems to be a growing feeling of desperation and fear. Too many people are working harder than ever and still not quite making it. And searching for answers, it is easy to turn anger against the most vulnerable or marginalized among us. Our spouses and children. Immigrants. Folks who look different or think differently from us. Or it can be directed inwardly where it brews into self-destructive rage, cynicism and despair.

What made Paul special was that his anger was born of love, touched by grace, and tempered by an essential optimism that each of us does better when we all do better. His anger stemmed from a deep empathy for others and sparked a passion to make the world a fairer and more just place to live. His anger came with fury and frenetic energy, but was softened by the twinkle in his eye and his lopsided grin and ever present hug.

Paul was an organizer, even as Senator. He channeled his anger into politics, but did not wield it as a sword. He used it to build collective power to make a real difference for those with little voice or power. "Politics is what we create by what we do, what we hope for, and what we dare imagine," he used to say.

Paul's was a politics of conviction -- of values enacted in practical struggle. He was a savvy politician and profound idealist. He was an organizer who dreamed of what the world could be and acted in the world as it was.

Paul steadfastly believed what he so often said: "The future will belong to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams ... those who have passion and who are willing to make the personal commitment to make our country better." Sometimes this happens through simple acts of human kindness; sometimes through politics; sometimes through community action and volunteerism. But always with the conviction that ordinary people acting together can make our world a better place.

It has been a difficult year since that grey October morning the plane went down. It is still hard for me to believe so many dear friends are gone. But the labor organizer Mother Jones used to say "Pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living." And so it is now up to each of us who embrace Paul's values to step forward and carry on.

On the Friday night of Paul's death, singer-songwriter Sara Thomsen sent me a song by Gil Turner (with additional verses added by Marion Wade) called "Carry it on." Its verses helped carry me through this past year:

There's a man by my side walkin'
There's a voice inside me talkin'
There's a word needs a-sayin'
Carry it on, carry it on.

For the dream never-ending
You can hear the voices blending
Loud and clear, their echoes sending
Carry it on, carry it on.

Thru the air the song is winging
Down the years, hope keeps springing
No more tears (or thru the tears) we're still singing
Carry it on, carry it on.

There are still tears to shed and much grieving to do. It is okay to be angry and frustrated, too. The threats we all face are real and as serious and dangerous as ever. But through it all, Paul's legacy is our challenge to dream dreams that fire our imagination and turn our grief and anger into the passion necessary to carry on his struggle for justice.