

STEERING A COURSE DEDICATED TO PUBLIC SERVICE BY LARRY FLORIN, SAN FRANCISCO

WHEN I left graduate school, I knew that I was destined for public life. Many of the ideals that motivated me to take responsibility in the SGI-USA caused me to seek out a career in public service. I believed that the only way for me to have a significant impact on society was to forsake the profit motive and work in a career dedicated to the public interest. I also felt that by doing so I could fulfill my mission to support SGI President Daisaku Ikeda's vision for global peace. I wanted to create, through my actions, pathways of understanding and trust toward the humane ideals of Buddhism.

Something I have learned in my career is that while many enter public life with strong ideals, the proximity to power and prestige can be intoxicating and lead us to veer from our initial purpose. It takes commitment and strength to carry through with our chosen mission. I guess that is why it's important to have a solid, profound philosophy and a mentor in life, someone who shares our ideals and who can continually steer us back on course.

During my fifteen years in the public sector, I have had some extraordinary opportunities to work closely with those in positions of high visibility. I have worked directly on the staff of three mayors, been chief of staff to the president of our county Board of Supervisors, headed up city departments, and managed numerous projects with high public exposure and citywide implications. Each of these brought with them unique challenges and an opportunity to learn more about the power structure in our country. I learned first-hand how it can be exhilarating to wake up in the morning and read your quotes in the newspaper or hear your voice on the radio as you're driving home. I've also learned how, if you live for these accolades, you can forget why you have undertaken such a mission.

WHEN I was hired into my first job after graduate school, I was filled with great enthusiasm and ideals. I assumed that every employment opportunity would be like my SGI youth division activities, filled with individuals working tirelessly and in unity to achieve a shared goal. Well, I was in for a huge surprise. My first job was to work as a staff planner for the Municipal Railway, the transit agency for the City of San Francisco. I was hired to work alongside individuals who had been at their jobs for twenty, thirty and in one case, forty years. I soon found out what happens when one is filled with cynicism and defeat. It was a debilitating environment in which many had long ago given up. Inevitably, when I would suggest a new way of doing something, I would be met with great apathy.

Undeterred, I would persist in writing memos to those in charge about how we could do things better. It was because of this persistence that I caught the attention of a senior in the organization. This individual took me under his wing and became the first of many supportive individuals who would take the time to train me.

This person, fifteen years my senior, had already had a great career in public service, serving previously in presidential, gubernatorial and mayoral administrations. He hired me, even though many more capable individuals were seeking a position with him. It was from here I learned the importance of persistence in reaching my ideals and working to improve the system.

In 1988 I received my formal introduction into politics. I was hired by Art Agnos, then the recently elected mayor of San Francisco. Mayor Agnos was a former assemblyman and social worker who was elected mayor of San Francisco on a platform that he would "shake

things up” at city hall. As a young idealist with tons of ideas and virtually no experience in politics, this was an exciting and intimidating world for me to be thrown into. I remember sitting through my first staff meeting with the mayor and wondering if the people in the room were even speaking the same language I was. For the first few meetings I was afraid even to open my mouth.

FORTUNATELY, once again I felt that forces in my environment were watching out for me. I became the personal project of the mayor’s chief of staff, a career politician who had a reputation as someone whom you did not cross. I would routinely run ideas by the chief of staff before bringing them to the mayor. More often than not, he would point out some flaw in my position and challenge me to talk with more people and think it through more thoroughly. It became a tutorial in politics.

I resolved to use this opportunity to gain as much experience as I could. First, mostly out of sheer terror and with the realization that I was in way over my head, I embarked upon a campaign of chanting as much as I could to the Gohonzon. The goal of my prayer was to manifest the wisdom to avoid saying anything stupid.

In addition, I always tried to pray with a conviction I had learned early on in my Buddhist practice. On one occasion, an SGI-USA leader to whom I was close reminded me of the passage where Nichiren Daishonin writes: “The belief of some is like fire while that of others is like water. When the former listen to the teachings, their passion flares up like fire, but as time goes on, they tend to discard their faith. To have faith like water means to believe continuously without ever regressing. Since you pay frequent visits to me regardless of the difficulties, your belief is comparable to flowing water. It is worthy of great respect!” (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishonin*, vol. 2 [2nd ed.], p. 250)

THE point here is that persistence is more important than raw enthusiasm or excitement. However, this leader said, once you understand that faith like flowing water is important, it’s better to make it “boiling water.” I took this to mean that with both persistence and passion, I could accomplish anything. From that time on, I always prayed to have a spirit like “boiling water”—and have tried to approach both my work and Buddhist activities with passion and tenacious persistence.

I volunteered for every assignment. When the government liaison officer left, I volunteered to be the mayor’s liaison to the Board of Supervisors; when the ballpark project manager left to take a job in the private sector, I volunteered to take on his duties. I let it be known that I was available whenever and wherever anyone needed assistance. It was an incredible experience that provided me with training that would help me for many more years to come.

In 1989 the mayor decided to put on the ballot his proposal to build a new ballpark for the San Francisco Giants, an initiative intended to keep the team from leaving San Francisco. It was during this campaign that I got my first lesson in the true “hardball” tactics that can come into play in an election. It was my job to travel with the mayor to his campaign appearances, prepare him for each event, take notes during the discussions that would inevitably ensue, and follow up with answers and commitments that he made. To me there was no question on this issue of the ballpark. It seemed obvious that this was a brilliant proposal, and that few things were more important than keeping baseball in San Francisco. Unfortunately, not everybody agreed.

The campaign became a referendum on the job that the mayor was doing for the city.

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For some individuals, especially those who felt they had been excluded from the decision-making process, it was an opportunity to teach the mayor a lesson. While generally believing that our policies were in the best interests of the public, we did not have a reputation for listening. There developed a perception within our office that those who disagreed with the policies coming from City Hall were being influenced by self-interested people looking to even a score. The opposition seized upon this sense of paranoia and elitism with the result that the initiative narrowly lost. I was devastated. It was the first campaign that I had worked on, and our initiative had lost by fewer than a thousand votes.

Rather than reflecting on the lessons of the campaign, however, some on the staff became dedicated to excluding those who had worked against the initiative. It was here that I got my next big lesson in politics: that is, how easy it is to lose perspective and become convinced that there are those who are simply out to destroy you. My closest friend in the administration, a man with a lot more experience than I, saw the signs and resigned. I simply couldn't understand how someone could abandon ship. I was so consumed with being in the limelight, at the center of attention, that I, like many on the staff, forgot the reason that we had entered public life. Rather than listening, we excluded people and increasingly saw the situation as one of us versus them. The negative results would manifest themselves in the next campaign.

In the midst of the ballpark campaign we got an unexpected breather, and I got an opportunity to gain a whole new perspective on public service. Three weeks before the election, the city of San Francisco was hit by a major earthquake. The 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake destroyed homes and left thousands of people homeless. Moments before the earthquake I had left the mayor and was heading for the ballpark to see the World Series game between the Giants and the A's. When the earthquake hit I was in my car driving, and as a result I didn't feel a thing. When I went to my seat I was told for the first time what had happened. At that point I was in disbelief, hearing reports that the Bay Bridge had collapsed and that many people had died.

ALTHOUGH emergency preparedness was part of the mission of the Mayor's Office, it was at that moment the furthest thing from our mind. Consequently none of us had any idea what to do. Instinctively, and because of my experience as an SGI-USA leader, I knew that I had to take decisive action and initiate communication. I had to find the mayor and be there to provide any necessary assistance. After making sure that my family was safe, I headed down to the Command Center, a building I barely knew existed that is supposed to act as a center for all city departments and the mayor in case of emergency. There I volunteered to do whatever was needed.

Over the next few weeks I found myself briefing national and state elected officials, convening special meetings of the Board of Supervisors, delivering blankets to families who were without heat, procuring thousands of flashlights for Chinatown residents left without electricity, and hundreds of other assignments. My SGI experience as a youth division member and leader planning and executing many events had taught me not to wait to be told what to do, but to take the initiative and do what had to be done. Watching people who had lost everything and helping them to resurrect whatever was left of their lives was a very sobering experience.

MY final lesson in my four-year tutorial was perhaps my most important. Despite the narrow loss of the ballpark ballot initiative, I thought things were going well. I was no longer intimidated by my colleagues, and I was functioning as a contributing member of the staff. I

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had been told by the mayor that I would have additional responsibilities in the second term and I looked forward to my new assignments. Unfortunately the second term was not to come. The individuals I mentioned earlier, who felt they had been excluded from the decision-making process, decided to fight back.

They found a very unlikely candidate—the former police chief of the city. After convincing him to run, they ran a brilliant campaign that exploited perceptions that the administration had isolated itself from the concerns of the average citizen. The result was that the administration I had been part of was thrown out of office after just one term. It was simply unfathomable to me that this could occur. I had become so oblivious that I could not believe people could think that we were acting in anything other than the public interest. In retrospect it was a good lesson in what can happen to elected officials. I have heard President Ikeda continually talk about how important it is for those who are elected to public office to understand that it is their mission to serve the people. After this experience it became clear to me how easy it is to fall short of that mission without even realizing it, and how critical it is to continuously remind oneself of that.

Despite being fired very publicly by the new administration, a move that was announced on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, I found myself with other opportunities over the next few years. I became chief of staff to the president of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, a role in which I worked with the supervisor in initiating legislation on everything from controlling litter to landmark gun control. I also served as director of the Office of Military Base Closure for the City and County of San Francisco, a position from which I managed the transition of three facilities in the city from military to civilian use. Ironically, I was hired for this position by Mayor Jordan, the man who had beaten Mayor Agnos in 1991.

In 1995 Mayor Jordan was defeated by Willie Brown, the longtime speaker of the California State Assembly. On Mayor Brown's first day in office I received a phone call from his secretary asking me to meet with him at 8:00 a.m. the next day. I had never met the new mayor and so I had no idea why he would want to see me.

The new mayor informed me that I had been recommended by some people, and he wanted to get to know me. We had a very nice conversation after which I left and returned to my office. Later that afternoon I started to receive a flood of phone calls from the press. It seems that the mayor had held a press conference later that day and announced that he had appointed me to be the executive director of the San Francisco Economic Summit. I not only had no idea that I was to be appointed to this position, but, more important, I had no idea what the Economic Summit was. I soon found out. Mayor Brown had proposed, during the election, to convene a gathering of the city's key decision makers and constituencies to develop a plan for the economic revitalization of the city.

The summit was to be modeled after a similar gathering held by President Clinton after he had been elected president, and I was to run it. I spent the next four months putting together the event. It certainly called upon all of my training and experience in both the youth division of the SGI-USA and in politics to pull this off. I was responsible for everything from the logistics and staging of the event to getting traditionally opposing groups to sit down at the same table and plan an agenda. It was an exhilarating experience. I had to continuously remind everybody throughout this process that we had to think about why we were gathering, and that was for the greater good of the city. Learning from previous mistakes, I insisted that we go throughout the city and listen to the concerns of individuals expressed in public forums.

The mayor agreed to chair each of these meetings. We got a great deal of good feedback and,

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more important, real-life experiences that helped us to focus our agenda on issues that mattered to the people. The resulting summit was a complete success and a historical event for our city. Addressing this gathering of 500 were three members of President Clinton's cabinet, mayors from major metropolitan cities, noted business and labor leaders and academics. Each challenged the participants to think about new ways of doing things.

THE most impressive speaker by all accounts was an individual from Pittsburgh named Bill Strickland, who worked with the homeless and the economically disadvantaged. Mr. Strickland had created a community where he trained those who were less fortunate to survive on their own. His message was filled with hope. Many of the principles he talked about reminded me of themes consistent with the mission of the SGI, ideas like how one individual can make a difference, how no person is beyond hope. What made this speech so moving was that Mr. Strickland was living this life and instilling hope in so many people who had been abandoned by society. Everybody gave him a standing ovation.

I have certainly learned a great deal from the tremendous opportunities that I have had over my years of public service. Each one has been a learning experience, and each one has deepened my understanding of how important it is to have the faith in humanity that Buddhism instills in us, as well as an excellent mentor in life. One experience crystallized for me the importance of the role that President Ikeda is playing daily through his meetings with public officials and his constant encouragement to us. I had the opportunity to witness in 1993, during President Ikeda's visit to San Francisco, his dialogues with some of our locally elected leaders. I watched these politicians, who had perhaps to some degree been jaded by their positions and sense of self-importance, immediately let down their guard upon meeting President Ikeda. Something in his life—his open-hearted demeanor or genuine respect for them as human beings—caused them to immediately open their hearts, listening attentively as students and asking him questions about problems they faced and what he perceived their missions to be. I witnessed a political official, trained to be stoic and unemotional, break down in tears as he then sincerely expressed his personal convictions after the encounter.

It made me realize that the real compassion of Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism is completely blind to position, power or status; it is directly conveyed to people's hearts through the sincerity of those who practice it.

My years of public service have given me great opportunities, but perhaps most important, it has made me realize that there is a mission more valuable than being a public official, and that is being a Bodhisattva—someone genuinely dedicated to the well-being and enrichment of ordinary people. □