

Team Farr:

There are times when I know we grumble about “why did Sam vote that way” or “why doesn’t Sam do X” or “(fill in the blank) Sam!” We are all so busy trying to deal with the workload that sometimes we lose sight of why we are here, doing what we do.

Attached is the transcript of a session Sam had in Washington with Mount Madonna students. I read it and it reminded me that behind the daily frustrations of congressional business, there is a genuine, honest-go-gosh public servant whom we work for, of whom we should be proud. This “unplugged” view of Sam I think will re-inspire you and erase any misgivings that may crop up from time to time about the boss’ motivation, dedication or focus.

If I didn’t think it was worth your reading, I wouldn’t have gone through the exercise of xeroxing it all!

Rochelle
7/21/00

~~Farr~~
Aaron
David
Courtney

Edited Journal Version B

MOUNT MADONNA SCHOOL

Interview with

Congressman Sam Farr

17th District of California

May 23rd, 2000

Sam Farr: Let me just say that being a member of Congress is being very busy. Wherever you are, you're always supposed to be someplace else at the same time. So you have to make decisions concerning conflicting priorities. I'm here with your class, but I could be doing something else; upstairs doing a speech; working on some projects; meeting with constituents.

You have to choose what you are going to do, but even so other choices are always in your mind, and you're thinking, "I should be someplace else." We were just talking about how hard it is for anybody in this business to remain focused all day long. Sometimes it seems that you're just passing through really quickly. It's like going to classes all day long until midnight and at the end of the day wondering "What did I accomplish other than being very busy?"

You come here as a legislator and realize the institution is so big and complex. People are always telling you "you can't do this" for one reason or another; you can't legislate as much as your passion's desire. I always think if you really want to be a good legislator and really learn how to do things you ought to serve in the State Legislature first. California, which is a very active place and has the largest, most diverse culture of any in the world, carries a lot more bills than other states and has to respond to the pressures of Californians. So the activity inside the State of California legislature is much more rapid than the activity back here at the national level.

Nonetheless, the passions are the same and I hope we can convey that to youth of our country.

You can discover that passion by being a part of this experience, and conveying what you learn to

the people that surround you; your family, your friends, and your neighbors. It's important because it is the trust that glues us together. The trust that we can self-govern ourselves, and that the decisions made are fair, just, and honest. It's so delicate because it all depends on people participating. With your generation, the stories are coming out about how kids really don't care much about public service, voting, or participating. They are more focused on "Where can I get a good job to pay me this salary?"

Everything in America, every job, every institution, depends on a good government because we make the laws under which business operates. If you don't contribute in some way to this process, which is the source of our prosperity, and makes the United States such a wonderful place to live, and if you don't bring your best, brightest and most enthusiastic support, our way of living can be tarnished and forever lost. That's why it's so delicate because, again, it depends on people participating, and fewer and fewer of our population are doing so in the elective process. That could destroy the very essence of what makes America so great. So I get energized when I see students like you coming here with your enthusiasm for learning about this system, trying figure out what makes America tick at the federal level. You can only get that by listening to different people that are in this job.

If you look at these people in government, I think you'll find that all of them could probably go out and make more money in the private sector, but they've chosen this profession, I think, as teachers choose the teaching profession. I think we need to reconnect, reinvigorate the youth of America that service to your country, and public service jobs are honorable positions. When I graduated from college, the most exciting thing for me to do, no matter what else had been offered to me, was to go into the Peace Corps, and I did. Nobody cared how much money you made; people quit their jobs all over America to work in Washington and help get the Peace Corps get started. You saw some of this spirit come about in McCain's campaign. People were reconnected because they thought that this candidate made a difference particularly in issues like campaign financing reform. So I think the spirit is out there. We just have to capture it, articulate

it, and market it a little better. That's why you are all marketers because the minute you learn about government, you can go tell somebody about it and spread the word.

I want to let a thousand dreams flourish by your visit. Thank you for coming.

Mira Vissell: Has your view of Congress, or the role of a Congressmen, changed at all in your eight years in office?

Sam Farr: Yes, I think it has matured. It is probably similar to your going to school when you were between your freshman and senior year. You get a gradually maturing view of the institution. You come here with ideas that you can do a lot more than you actually can. Then you remember that what we do, we do for the whole nation, and it is only by a process of compromise that all of these people that come here with all of these passions can work together. We have some views on each extreme, so you end up bargaining down the middle. What we do also affects the whole nation so the "keel of the ship of state" is well set and does not move very rapidly. If you want rapid change, you do it at the local and state level. The institution of Congress is the keel of government in the United States, and it changes direction very slowly. You realize that as you stay here longer, and get a better viewpoint of what significant change is, and what it really takes to make it come about.

Alicia Weston-Miles: During our stay here, we've met some pretty incredible people at all levels of the government service. What was most apparent and common to every single person that we spoke with was how incredibly hard they worked, their commitment, and their passion for their work. This came as a little bit of a surprise to some of us. Why do you think this aspect of government is so hidden from the American people?

Sam Farr: I don't know, because I'm around it all the time. That's a really good question. You pointed out that it's a surprise. Well why is it a surprise to you?

Alicia Weston-Miles: Well it's a surprise to me because it is so different from the way that society looks at government. There's a negative image given to our political system. I never really thought, "yeah, these people in Washington are working extremely hard hours." I guess I never really thought about it, and it was never really presented to me as something to think about.

Sam Farr: Well, you've asked probably one of the most profound questions! You see sitcoms always joking about Washington, and Jay Leno and David Letterman making jokes about it, etc. The cynicism in this country is so rampant, and I'm very offended by these sort of jokes about government and the people in it. Sure I've laughed at them, but I still think that they're undermining the faith and confidence that people ought to have. What if you could figure out a way to change that? Maybe that's something to challenge the class with: how can you change that thinking? This is an example of one of the things I'm trying to say you can do; you've got to start this change. A journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step, and you can do it yourself. I try to do it by conveying this sort of challenge to students. I never knew what I was going to do when I was your age and who knows, somebody in this class may be a member of Congress, or President of the United States someday. I really believe that.

For example, Tom's from North Monterey County. He knows what's motivated him to come here. He was a concierge at a hotel in the private sector, a hard working student who came to the Hill, and I think Tom reflects most the staff here in that he gets a psychic compensation to working here. It is that he is making a difference. However, the press never picks up on that psychic compensation, and unfortunately what we do as members of Congress when hiring press secretaries, is put out press releases and papers that don't report on that theme. What we need is a form of reporting that is something like what you've done in your journal. There's a story of the enthusiasm in that journal that each of you will find here. As students you will think, "well this is keen! This is really nifty! I didn't know this, and now that I do I'm excited about it." We could write about that every day, describing cases where we solved problems. I've had people tell me

stories that make me cry because they have changed people's lives. We need to start reporting that, and they've got to start printing it, but they're not doing it.

So the coverage of Congress is misdirected both internally and externally.

Mr. Mailliard: Sam, that really is one of our goals. This tape recorder here is actually streaming the audio to the computer, and then we are putting the audio of this interview up on the web site with pictures, transcripts, and student's comments. We are being followed by people in the district, and the students families who have emailed our website out to friends and extended family around the country. So we actually have a constituency that's really listening into this conversation.

As you know, I grew up in this political world, and the thing that always struck me was the dislocation between the reality of what you do here, your intentions, and the public impression. That's really the fundamental reason why we're here. There are other reasons, but, that's the core.

Sam Farr: Plus this job is totally public review. Everything we do is on C-SPAN, and everything we write is published. There are no secrets. Every investment that we make, every activity we have is just an open book. Everybody can know about your life, all the time, and yet there's this big secret about what we do. If I have a wish, or a desire, it is that your generation could break this. You don't have to accept this cycle. You don't have to accept poverty in America. You don't have to accept injustice. We don't have to accept human suffering; we just don't! And we don't have to accept this cynicism either.

Jenny Johnston: How do you deal with the conflicts that inevitably arise between environmental concerns say for marine habitats, and concerns of agriculture that requires chemicals for crop protection?

Sam Farr: Good question. We live in this balance of the joining of land and water which is the most dramatic and also most fragile ecosystem in the world; where water meets land. We've taken all those tide pools and rocks for granted, and that's the ecosystem that gets pounded the most from nature. But now people are the ones crashing into them even harder than the waves. People are using chemicals on land that run into the ocean, and we must ask ourselves, what consequences are we going to have?

That's one of the reasons we use all our marine labs to study it. First you find out, okay, what do we need to know? Where is there a lack of knowledge? We don't really know how much or where all these chemicals running down into the sanctuaries are coming from in order to be able to trace them. We can suppose that, "Well if this chemical's getting in, then it ought to have some consequences on these organisms", and you can begin with this causal connection. This leads to the next idea, "Maybe we ought not use that chemical, or we should make sure that's it's treated or handled in a different way." We did that with banning of DDT. So first you've got to get money for the studies, and that's what I've done as a member of Congress. The national marine sanctuary is working with AMBAG, the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments, and the farm bureaus of all of the counties within the sanctuary to fund a program that looks at all of the chemicals. It traces where they are put on, what happens to them when it rains, and identifying any patterns. That will lead to knowledge about better farming practices, and the farm bureaus are in it, so it's not like this is all combative. I think people are very interested in doing their business in a better way. The problem with a lot of the ideas is that they increase the cost of doing business. Then you can't sell your products for higher prices, so you end up being squeezed out of the market. That's what people in business don't want to do, but if they can just learn how to apply chemicals in a smarter way or find alternative chemicals that are less harmful to the environment, they are willing to do it.

Dante Branciforte: What will it take to cause us as a society to be willing to consume less? Especially given that other countries point to our level of consumption as a reason for not pursuing more environmentally sound policies. Take for example, the recent Kyoto conference.

Sam Farr: I think all countries look out, first of all, for their own selfish interests economically. I don't think it is a case of, "America's this evil country and the rest of these countries are all good." However, I think there exists also this unwillingness to accept the responsibility to being a global brother and sister. The United States tries to help a lot, but we can do a better job. I think it is very easy to criticize the affluence of America, and I think Americans are critical of it too because we know we are wasteful consumers. We start by trying to deal with what can we do to make us less so? Your generation has to accept as much responsibility as my generation by asking, "what do we do?" I'm trying to get this Congress to recycle just the little things. We have a great recycling program in America but Congress doesn't live by it. There's a funny sense around here of, "We make the laws but we don't have to obey the laws because we don't actually live here." This is just a building we work in, but we live someplace else. Is this building handicapped accessible in your opinion? There's a lot of stairs around this place. I don't even know whether they've gone through and done energy audits in these buildings like they probably have done in your school.

So a lot of these things begin at home. The responsibility for a democracy begins with the self, and the question for the self is "how do I become a better citizen?" How do I learn to get along with people? How do I learn to help those in need? I mean basically the tenets of most religions in the world.

Dante Branciforte: It seems like a new way, in order to not only be accepted, but actually followed has to be easier than the previous way.

Sam Farr: It has to be less selfish. I was listening to a businessman tell me about doing business overseas in countries where you have to pay everything under the table. He said in the long run, corruption is more expensive for a business. In the end when you deal with corruption, there's unreliability because you're paying out all this money and you're not getting a return on it necessarily. I think that everybody would love to live in a corruption-free society. Fortunately, America's probably got one of the best societies in that sense. There's envy of America because of how we can live so freely.

Mr. Mailliard: The efficiencies of honesty are phenomenal. With corruption, it's not the money that gets paid out, it's the loss of efficiency, or coherency. It is the collateral cost that really breaks a country. Take for example road maintenance, if money is allocated for a road and it goes into somebody's pocket, that's one thing. However the effects of the bad road in terms of loss of life, traffic accidents, the amount of down time for vehicles, and the slowness with which things move, is the real cost. Also the amount of time you spend worrying about who's going to get what from you is really the loss, and it's phenomenal.

Sam Farr: That goes back to that delicate issue of whether we have appreciated America enough to realize the profundity of the system of governance that we've created, and that we must nurture that. The political system, the governance of our country, needs as much nurturing constantly as a child does in order to be healthy, and that's your role.

Laura Johnson: I have a question. You already talked about how we have a responsibility to the world. We've also heard from Undersecretary Pickering at the State Department and Caroline Becraft who's the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. They both told us that America needs to understand it's post-Cold War role in the world. That it is in our best interest to maintain a positive global presence and that we have to be willing to commit some of our own resources to create and sustain a stable global community. Do you agree with this point of view? How do you think we can best accomplish this task?

Sam Farr: Oh, I absolutely agree with it. The greatest resources we have in America are our people, and we have to commit our people, and lend their talents to other countries. As I travel to Latin America now, and I was there thirty years ago as a Peace Corps volunteer, I'm meeting the President's of countries rather than the presidents of barrios, and it's interesting. What they are all asking for is not American aide like they were six years ago. Now they are saying, "We need to upgrade our skills. We need training. We need your people to come here."

It's not necessarily bringing people from Latin American countries to our schools, because then they'll have a wonderful experience living in America, training in our institutions but then saying, "Gee, we could never do this back in our country, because we just don't have all this infrastructure support."

We need a rededication to using American ingenuity and American skills to go to other countries, and if we're so darn smart, learn their language, live with them and teach them how to do their job better where they are.

Mr. Mailliard: Carolyn Becraft said a very enigmatic thing; that "America needs to give up some of its power in order to maintain its power," that we have to give power to others in order for us to maintain our position and exercise a positive influence in the world.

Sam Farr: Well a lot of philosophers are better at understanding this than I am, but what I've learned in politics is that you want your enemies to be just as well equipped as you are because only in fairness will you succeed. If you want the globe to mature, then there's got to be a more leveling of the disparity, the difference between rich and poor, in the world because they'll never trust you as long as you have more advantage.

Katie Fayram: Caroline Becraft told us just yesterday that if you have never failed, you have never won. What sort of challenges have been your teachers?

Sam Farr: We all have a lot of failures; first your love failures, your academic failures, jobs, etc. I've had them all. I think you have to have enough self-esteem and confidence for when you have failed, so you can recover. I have the greatest admiration for people with addictions that are able to overcome them because you see so many people that can't, and you realize how difficult it is. So I think that there's something in their persona that allows them to recover and that's what's important. I told my own child, and you probably have all heard this from your parents, that when the opportunity to make a wrong choice is offered to you, there won't be any parental guidance; there won't be anybody there telling you not to take that offer. You've got to have enough confidence in yourself that you can say no to peer pressure, and you all know kids that can. What we need to do is make sure that every human being at least has a foundation to be able to resist evil, or enough confidence to say no to evil.

Karl Holzknacht: Sheldon Wolin, a political philosopher said that "the strength of democracy has been its capacity to confront difference and to cherish it, not just to think about it as an impediment to rational decision-making." How can we foster an attitude that allows us to embrace our diversity rather than just tolerate it?

Sam Farr: I think we are trying to learn that. How would you respond to that?

Karl Holzknacht: Well, it seems to me that a lot of that lies in the culture, and that's something that's especially important to a few of the people we've interviewed. Specifically, Alyse Nelson, who is an Assistant Director of the President's Inter-Agency Council on Women. She discussed with us her conversations with young women of different cultures, and how they would return to their countries, and help change the communities around them.

Sam Farr: What I've learned in life is that prejudices are learned, and so are tolerances. So it is about teaching. The best person to answer that question that you are going to talk to is John Lewis.

Mr. Mailliard: We saw Bonnie Campbell yesterday; she is the director of Violence Against Woman Office for the Justice Department. She was essentially saying the same thing; that the attitudes that people have about domestic violence are learned in the family, and then carried out through the generations. It's the same question. How do we change the way that we think about ourselves; how do we tell ourselves a different story that includes an embracing rather than simple tolerance of diversity? We can see in the ecosystem that diversity makes strength, and yet we haven't been able to really translate that into a cultural awareness or social awareness. I don't know if you can legislate that. Maybe you can make certain penalties for extreme non-tolerance. What role does the government have in helping us change our way of thinking?

Sam Farr: Well I think we do; we passed the civil rights laws, and we are always trying to amend those to allow for broader based application. We are seeing that now with the domestic violence or the gay/lesbian issues, but I think there's something more profound than that. The older you get, the more you realize that we've all assumed the most important role in life without any training at all, and that's being a parent. If we really had skilled parenting abilities in society, we wouldn't teach the wrong thing. So the ounce of prevention is in raising children, and the pound of the cure is the cost of not raising them holistically, in a sense. There are costs when children grow up without learning how to cope, be tolerant, and live in a just society.

Chris Sun: Barbara Tuckman, a historian, defines a hero as someone with nobility of purpose. Who are some heroes in your life?

Sam Farr: My dad. He passed away three years ago. John F. Kennedy. My mom. She died when she was forty-eight of cancer. My mother grew up extremely well-educated and bright, in fact I

just found some papers she wrote when she was twenty-one years old. She traveled to Europe in the 1930's. They are the best written papers I've ever read and to see that she could write like that at age 21 is just absolutely phenomenal. She always pushed the envelope. She was always questioning injustice in America. My father told me a story of when we were in the South, coming back from Puerto Rico. We were in New Orleans, and my mother took my sister and I to wait for a bus. We got on the bus, walked to the back and sat down. The driver pulled the bus over and told my mother she couldn't sit in the back of the bus; it was only for colored people. She said, well, this is where I want to sit, and he said, well the bus can't go on, you better get off. So she said, if I can't ride back here, I don't want to. So I always say when Rosa Parks stood up, my mother sat down. (Laughter).

Teachers are my heroes just because they inspired me. I think teaching is probably the greatest profession. All these people that have become incredibly successful whether it's in football, as the President of the United States, or as a rock star, if you ask them that same question, they all go back and say some teacher in their life. So I say if this is what all the most successful people in the world think is the most important profession, why don't we honor the profession by equaling the salary to that of Michael Jordan? I'm thinking about a Bill to create a minimum wage for teachers of fifty thousand dollars. That's a long step from your question, but it's people that we honor and respect that are heroes.

Zack Donoghue: Drawing on your experience, what's the best advice you can give to our generation?

Sam Farr: Believe in something that you have a passion for. Believe in it and pursue it. Take risks, as long as they are not threatening to your health and welfare. Youth lasts a long time, and I think there is too much pressure to try to be somewhere too early in life. I think most of us didn't decide what we wanted to do until our late twenties, early thirties, and yet you are pressured from the time you graduate from high school. Your focus is, "where you are going to go to college?"

There's big pressure concerning what you are going to study, and what your major is. Where are you going to go to Graduate School? Where are you going to get a job? Who are you dating?

I don't know if you have much extra time in D.C., but there's a fellow you ought to seek out. His name is Ben Jealous. He grew up on the Monterey Peninsula. He's an African American. Ben Jealous is one of my heroes. He went to Columbia University and just because he's so outgoing, he was elected President of the black student union which went on strike at Columbia. He had to back up the union because he was the president of it, although he didn't agree with all of the things that they were doing. For that, he was expelled from Columbia. He went to the south and worked, trying to stop injustices, and he is still committed to doing away with the death penalty. His grandmother told, "you should get back into Columbia and then quit on your terms, but don't let them throw you out. You are too good a kid, and you did the right thing." He got back into Columbia and guess what; he was selected as a Rhodes Scholar because he stood by his convictions of doing things that were totally different. So I think that what you are seeing is that people are trying to select among you students that have really had some different kinds of experiences.

That's why when I went in the Peace Corps, my mother and father were really supportive of it because they taught me that public service is the highest of all callings. I was excited about it, but I didn't have a peer among me that thought I was doing the right thing. They thought I was nuts! You're going to give up two years of your life, and then you're going to be behind. What are you going to gain from living in a culture of poverty in another country? But you know, it was the greatest experience of my life. I took a risk, but I knew I was right in my heart. Was I nervous and scared? Yeah, because nobody had ever done it before. There were many anxieties with that decision, but I was driven by it and it changed my life.

So my suggestion to you is; follow those passions. There is some voice in you, and the discussion we had this morning was how do you follow your childhood dreams? Follow those dreams. They are going in the right place.

Student Comment

“Sam Farr was a great interview. He was kind, out-going, generous, respectful, thoughtful, intelligent, calm, and patient. He seems to have achieved a delicate balance between being a dreamer and a doer. Even though we, as a group, had never met him before, he treated us like old friends. I love the way he talked about the government as if it were a child. He said that it is delicate and fragile, and very dependent on our care and respect. I agree. Without our support of the government, it would not function. If we ridicule it and don't trust it, then it will not function at its full capacity, which I believe to be extremely great. It was set up by the people and for the people, and it is dependent on the faith of the people.”

-Alison Alderdice

“The idea of active democracy has now been planted inside me. In fact, Sam Farr said, ‘The responsibility for democracy begins with the self.’ That is empowering. I think that it is important for the American people to feel politically empowered, and this trip has made me so.” –Aaron Jacobs-Smith