

Tony Shu, MA – 2017

“Today was crazy cool and a little overwhelming.”

These were the first words I wrote in my United States Senate Youth Program (USSYP) journal on March 4th at the auspicious time of 11:11 PM. My head was swimming with new information, faces, and opinions; but despite the millions of things I wanted to write, I could not formulate cogent sentences or summon words more descriptive than “cool.” In the moment, it was impossible to understand the magnitude of everything that had happened.

Although my perspective was so blurred during the week, looking back at my notes, it is ironically the speakers’ points about understanding and broadening our own perspectives that I find most valuable:

Hearing from Jeffrey Herbst at the Newseum was a perfect start. When we aren’t afforded the privilege of actually seeing the action in Washington D.C., the news is our only window into politics. While we all know that different news organizations have their own biases, Dr. Herbst reminds us that those biases are not always harmful. We don’t want *neutral* news; rather, it is okay for journalists to express their opinions as long as news consumers actively work toward receiving a true “variety” of news with diverse perspectives. With social media and the ease of spreading fake or extremely partisan news, Herbst implored us to ask ourselves: “What is my news consumption *strategy*?”

Another powerful speaker was Surgeon General Vivek Murthy. His advice sometimes contradicted with existing notions of achieving success and it was special to hear life wisdoms from such a thoughtful and perceptive person. Whereas students are often told to plan for the long-term and set huge distant goals (like ‘going to college’), the surgeon general urges us to also think short term and warns against sacrificing ‘fulfillment of the now’ for long-term goals. One of the best methods he recommends to achieve fulfillment is to have ‘empty space’ in our lives: time spent thinking or truly relaxing. The surgeon general believes that empty space allows our lives to blossom, to manifest positive “accidents of fate”, and to better discover exactly who we are meant to be.

In terms of medicine and public health, the surgeon general wants to refocus our nation’s effort toward *prevention* rather than simply treatment. He proposed implementing more sidewalks as a unique method for disease prevention. Although sidewalks aren’t as flashy as a new wonder-drug, enabling people to walk just 22 minutes per day can greatly reduce risks of diabetes and heart issues. Furthermore, the surgeon general argued that global health and domestic health are merging and that “Health Equity is not just a slogan.” As good health benefits everyone in society and the consequences of illness can affect us all, we have to work to prevent diseases in people around the world and at every socioeconomic level; we have to expand our view on how health is truly established.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson emphasized that we all must be cognizant of the fact that we are our own toughest critics and that it is okay to “Cut yourself a little slack and appreciate what you’ve already done.” Secretary Tillerson went on to explain that being kind to ourselves comes with realizing that we are only one small part in something larger and that “it’s not all about you.” This is something I hope our president will come to realize as well.

Before Senator Cory Booker memorably bolted out of the room with his entourage to cast a vote on the Senate Floor, he spoke to us about acknowledging our privilege. He declared that “we were born on third base - we did not hit a triple.” In other words, we owe a lot to our ancestors and to every American before us for the country we have today. We must therefore not only be appreciative, but also willing to mobilize ourselves and others to engage in public service and “pay it forward” to future generations.

I am eternally grateful to The Hearst Foundations and its staff, our wise and devoted Military Mentors, the kind and dedicated Jakub and Erin, all of the speakers, and everyone who made the week possible.

I will cherish the memories of the time spent with the other delegates. I will miss having such diversity of opinions and the lively conversations/frequent disagreements with the conservatives, centrists, socialists, and liberals from across the nation; I appreciate their candor, cordiality, and compassion; and I loved every minute of our midnight policy debates, the line dances in the ballroom, the speeches on the bus rides, the 3:00 AM breakfast on our last morning, and the numerous hours we spent posing for photos and selfies.

Taking another look at my notebook, there is one hopeful, encouraging, and simple piece of advice from Surgeon General Vivek Murthy that I starred (multiple times), circled, and underlined: being in a generation referred to as the 'future of America' does not mean we have to wait for the future before we act on our hopes. I am so excited to see where all of the delegates end up in the future; but more importantly, I am thrilled to keep up with the smaller steps and actions they are taking today.