A Tribute to Maynard E. Pirsig

Lawrence R. Yetka
TRIBUTE TO MAYNARD PIRSIG

The Honorable Lawrence R. Yetka

Maynard E. Pirsig was the greatest legal mind in the history of Minnesota. How easy for me, and how proud I am, to write of my association with him that lasted for over half a century.

I first met Maynard Pirsig in the fall of 1945 when I was a first-year law student at the University of Minnesota. At that time, the Minnesota Plan was still in effect. That plan allowed a prospective lawyer to elect a six-year training course consisting of a specially selected two-year pre-law list of courses and four years in law school, in lieu of the customary four-year undergraduate degree and three-year law school curriculum that is common today. I selected the Minnesota Plan. As a result, I had Maynard Pirsig as a professor for at least five or six law school courses over four years. These courses included common-law actions, pleading, damages, legal ethics, and judicial administration. And, as I recall, I also took a criminal law course from him.

I will always remember his droll, dry sense of humor, his wit, and pixie-like smile. He was a great scholar and a wonderful teacher. The one word that best describes him is brilliant! He was brilliant of mind, of spirit, and in wisdom. I graduated from the law school in December 1948 and received my diploma from both the retiring Dean Fraser and the new dean, Maynard E. Pirsig.

In the fall of 1950, I was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives, and by January 1955, I had become chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. In those years, only lawyers were permitted to be members of the judiciary committee. Because lawyers held all of the key leadership positions in the House, the judiciary committee became the committee to which most major legislation was sent. We had many leaders from the legal profession sponsor bills that would come before our committee, but it was Dean Pirsig who had our ear. When he first strode into the judici-

ary committee in January 1955, he discovered that a majority of the members of the committee were his former students. Not only was I a former student, but men such as Judges Wozniak, Popovich, and Fitzgerald; Majority Leader Cina; and Representative Noreen from Duluth, who later became famous as a member of the West Publishing Company, were former students as well. It was Dean Pirsig who presented the judicial article amendment to the Minnesota Constitution, which was placed on the 1956 ballot. He also sold the committee on the idea of cooperating with other states in promoting and adopting uniform state laws. Thus, it was no surprise that Minnesota became the first state to approve the Uniform Arbitration Act.

When I left the legislature in 1961, I soon was appointed to the State Judicial Council, which was the primary Minnesota agency for continual study of the legal and judicial system in Minnesota. Once again, nearly all of the records of the work of the council – from the time of its formation in 1937 until the early 1960s – were marked by the works of Dean Pirsig.

In 1973, I became a member of the Minnesota Supreme Court. In 1974, I became chairman of the judicial council and, of its successor, the Judicial Planning Committee. Once again, Dean Pirsig was a treasure of knowledge and resources and helped us in arriving at the recommendation for our new court of appeals and for the passage of the Judicial Reorganization Act in 1977.

Dean Pirsig and I appeared together in the late 1980s on WCCO Radio. We discussed the changes in the judicial system that had taken place since the famous speech by Dean Roscoe Pound, given in our new state capitol in 1907, entitled “Popular Causes for Dissatisfaction in the Administration of Justice.” At the time we appeared on the radio program, Dean Pirsig was already over eighty-five years old, but he participated in the discussion with the enthusiasm of a young law student.

Dean Pirsig was my professor, my dean, my mentor, and my friend for over fifty years. His great legacy to the legal profession and to the people of this state has enriched us all. He was truly one in a million.