

Mindfulness in Politics by Michael Edwards

The movement for “mindfulness meditation” is growing, but can it break the modern political gridlock? An interview with Tim Ryan, the US Congressman who wants a “quiet revolution” in America.

With bills on immigration, gun control and balancing the budget currently stalled in Congress, many Americans would try anything to unfreeze the US political logjam, from magic mushrooms to Punxsutawney Phil Sowerby, “the world’s most famous prognosticating rodent”. Congressman Tim Ryan’s solution is more conventional: he wants everyone to develop greater “mindfulness”, through simple forms of meditation and other practices that focus our attention and help us listen to each other.

Elected to the House of Representatives at the tender age of 29, the Democrat from Ohio spoke out repeatedly against the policies of President George W. Bush on Iraq, the economy and other issues. But then so did many others. What makes Ryan stand out is his conviction that the USA can be transformed - not just “tinkered with”, as he puts it in *A Mindful Nation*, the book he published in 2012.

Practicing mindfulness may not get everyone on the same page in detailed policy terms, he believes, but it could help to find more common ground between different views and break the political gridlock. In this sense the personal is always political. As he says in his book, “our attempts to fix our outer world have not made us feel safer or more secure,” but “imagine what our energy policy would look like if every person became more aware of their impact on the planet.”

At least that’s the theory. There’s little evidence so far that mindfulness is sweeping through the corridors of power, and there’s an upbeat tone in Ryan’s approach that seems out of place with the realities of Washington DC: “Strip away the materialism, the marketing, the media and the technology and our fundamental nature is revealed,” he writes, “joyous, generous and courageous.”

Still, given that US politics is soaked through with cynicism, “gotcha” tactics and manipulation, even admitting that you meditate is a courageous thing to do, let alone publicly recommending it to others. And who knows, the “quiet revolution” of mindfulness might even work. To find out how, I spoke to Tim Ryan.

ME: What led you to write *A Mindful Nation* and how has it been received by your colleagues?

TR: “Growing up Catholic in a semi-contemplative environment, I flirted for years with

different kinds of meditation, and that eventually led me to a five-day retreat (at the Menla Center in New York's Catskill Mountains). Through more and more silence in the course of the retreat I discovered the fact that my mind and my body were actually in the same place at the same time, and immediately felt a higher level of concentration and focus as my stress levels relaxed. As a member of Congress and the Appropriations Committee that spends this country's money, I realized how much of an impact this could have on our education system and on health care, and that journey eventually led to A Mindful Nation, which honors the pioneers of this quiet revolution in the USA and around the world. I began to understand how this could be transformational in helping us to thrive together in the 21st century.

So I started a "quiet time caucus" on Capitol Hill in which members of Congress can get together for thirty minutes before the first vote each week in the Speaker's Chapel off the Rotunda - they can do anything they like so long as it is silent (including take a nap). Once a week we do the same for Congressional staff members so they can catch up on the latest mindfulness research and take part in a short guided meditation."

ME: What would you say to those who might criticize you for being naive at a time of unprecedented political polarization and power plays in Washington DC?

TR: "Well, how about if we stopped ruminating about things that happened in the past or what could go wrong in the future, and instead begin to ground ourselves in the present moment? That would start to change the way we look at the world and how we interact in our personal and political relationships. We might listen to each-other a bit more, and become a bit more creative and open to different solutions. Maybe this could even be the beginning of creating an alternative vision for what the country could look like, what our schools could look like if they really emphasized social and emotional learning, feeling safe, and managing our emotions as the first step to being a successful student.

Look at our health care system and how chronic levels of stress are making us sick or even sicker, and how they prevent our body from healing itself. We have to have a more balanced approach in our health-care system, rather than the default options of putting people on drugs or cutting them open in expensive surgery.

If people recognize the impact that stress is having in driving up health-care costs - if we can get a group of people who understand this and are active in the political process - then they can get involved in local school boards and hospitals, and that can have a transformational effect over time. Getting involved in politics in this spirit is essential to move the ball further down the field."

ME: What about when people disagree on hot button issues - can mindfulness help in those situations?

TR: "It's hard to be nice to somebody if you're stressed out of your mind - when I'm short with someone or I'm not listening to them the chances are that my stress levels are higher than they should be. So to be able to calm yourself down a little allows you to listen to what the other person is saying, as opposed to preparing what you're going to say next while they are still talking. There is a lot of science behind this when you look at how your brain works. Politics tends to activate parts of the brain that are associated with stress, and that shuts down access to other parts of the brain that house your executive functions like attention, focus and decision-making. So if we can't access those things we're certainly not going to be able to solve the great economic and social and political issues that face us. Bringing a touch of mindfulness to turn down the heat a little can

open up conversations where we actually sit down and think instead of just yelling at each other.

A lot of people don't understand mindfulness, but when you talk about slowing down and being in the present moment they get enthusiastic, across partisan lines. It's about participating in your own health care, in education, in politics, and becoming more resilient, and there's no reason why people should rule this out because it doesn't fit into their political philosophy. As the Rev Jim Wallis says, we don't have to go further to the left or right, we just have to go deeper, deeper into the water where we are connected rather than staying in the waves or the surface of our differences."

ME: I understand, but many people in the USA feel alienated by politics of any sort. What would you say to them?

TR: "Politics is a reflection of the country, and there's a lot of anxiety in the country right now, a lot of unknowns. Politics is on TV every night increasing those things for people, and we need to get that fixed. But a movement for mindfulness is not going to be built from the top down, it's going to be organic, it's going to grow from the grassroots as people make small changes in their communities and institutions. These small shifts, happening across the country in an organic way, are going to allow a mindfulness movement to blossom, and that makes me very optimistic.

I think this will change our priorities, and I think you are already starting to see people saying "well yes, I'm looking for something different. I've dropped out of the political system but I want to get back into it, and I want to vote for somebody who is going to talk about actual solutions." If this agenda is put out there I think you are going to see a lot of people get more involved in the political system and begin to shift our politics. And I think we are very close, in the next few years, to having a real renaissance in terms of what our neighborhoods could look like, how we're going to grow more food in our cities through urban farming and farmers' markets, for example, and how we tie that into the health of our schools.

So when this movement takes off you're going to see a different kind of politics in America."