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Ohio congressman on a mission to bring meditation to the masses

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Apr. 20, 2012

Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio (RNS/Courtesy HayHouse)

By age 35, Congressman Tim Ryan had been one of Ohio's youngest state senators, served two terms in the U.S. Congress and hobnobbed with presidents and prime ministers.

But a different story, full of unmet ambitions and caustic self-criticism, coursed through Ryan's mind, carrying him away from even the most important moments.

"I was so caught up in my story that I missed my life," the Ohio Democrat writes in his new book, "A Mindful Nation: How a Simple Practice Can Help Us Reduce Stress, Improve Performance, and Recapture the American Spirit."

Practicing mindfulness meditation, Ryan says, has quieted the nattering internal narrative, making him more relaxed, focused and compassionate. Now 39, the five-term congressman is enlisting teachers, doctors, business leaders, scientists and military personnel in a "quiet revolution" to bring mindfulness to the masses.

Ryan, a Roman Catholic, spoke recently with Religion News Service about how meditation helped him avoid burnout, how it resembles praying the rosary, and why you don't have to be a Buddhist to meditate. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Why did you write this book?

The book came out of my going around the county to meet scientists studying mindfulness; teachers using it in schools; health care practitioners implementing it in our health care system; our military using it to treat veterans and build mental resilience. And I thought the world needed to see what they are doing. They are pioneers in what will be the next great movement in the United States: the movement of mindfulness.

When did your interest in mindfulness start?

It started a long time ago. My grandparents and my mom prayed the rosary a lot, and later in life I had a priest friend of mine teach me centering prayer, based on Father Thomas Keating's work. That led to practicing different kinds of meditation off and on as I got older.

And when did you begin to consistently practice meditation?

I had been running extremely hard with my job and traveling across Ohio and the country to help Democrats take back the House in 2006, and then there was the presidential election. I was 35 and I thought, "I'm going to be burned out by the time I'm 40. I really need to jump-start my meditation practice." Two days after the presidential election, I spent five days at a retreat in increasing levels of silence. It reminded me of how I felt when I played sports: being in "the zone" with mind and body grounded in the present moment.

And you continue to meditate every day?

Yes, 40 to 45 minutes every morning before I leave the house and go out into the world.

Has meditation changed how you do your job in Congress?

I feel like I choose better what issues are really important to my constituents and to me, as opposed to thinking that you can somehow address every issue across the political spectrum. You just have to figure out where you are going to put your attention. That's something that everyone is trying to figure out, whether you're a congressman or a single mom.

So, do you think you'd want to introduce mindfulness to Speaker John Boehner or Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi?

(Laughs) If anybody wanted to try it, I'd be happy to point them in the right direction.

What would you tell Boehner, for example?

He plays golf, and I might say that if you look at high-performing golfers, they are not over a 15-foot putt thinking about the meeting they are going to have tomorrow. They are thinking about sinking the putt. It's all about coordinating the body and mind to be in the present moment, and how powerful that can be.

Because of mindfulness' Buddhist roots, a lot of people think it's a religious practice. How does your meditation relate to your Catholic faith?

If you love your neighbor and are compassionate, are you automatically a Christian? Practicing present-moment

awareness does not entail joining any religion or accepting any belief system. As a Catholic, I find mindfulness helps me participate in my religion more wholeheartedly. If you are praying the rosary, participating in the rituals at Mass or listening to the priest preach,
you will actually be paying attention! Whatever your religion is, it can enhance the experience of participating in that religion. What's more beautiful than that?

There do seem to be some Buddhist concepts in your book, such as the interconnectedness of all beings. Has meditation made you more interested in Buddhist philosophy?

I love studying different religions. For me, learning and drawing from the different religious traditions is essential to being a good public servant. And the connections between our various religious traditions become our public ethic; they tie us together.

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