

Miami Herald, The (FL)
as provided by The McClatchy Company

February 5, 2013

Mindfulness making its way into the mainstream

The meditative practice, with its roots in Buddhism and backed by science, is being adopted in classrooms, governmental bodies and corporate suites.

Author: MARCELLA MCCARTHY, Special to The Miami Herald

Article Text:

Scott Rogers' office isn't that of a typical law professor. A bookshelf is piled high with books on meditation rather than legal tomes. A round table is surrounded by bamboo chairs, where Rogers invites students to sit for 10 minutes to quiet the mind.

Rogers practices mindfulness, which involves paying attention in a particular way, on purpose and in the present, often through breathing techniques. The practice, which has roots in Buddhism and spiritual growth, is increasingly being studied by scientists and the medical profession as a way to reduce stress and enhance one's health.

Rogers teaches law students at the University of Miami how to incorporate mindfulness into their lives and future legal practices. It's a hot topic. Last month's cover story in the ABA Journal was headlined, "Keeping It Civil." Later this month, the College of Law at Florida International University is conducting a symposium on professionalism, which includes mindfulness. And Mindful Kids Miami is bringing Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, to the University of Miami on Saturday to discuss his new book, A Mindful Nation. "We not only need to reduce our stress," Ryan writes in his book, "but we need to become kinder for the sake of our own survival."

For Rogers, his quest to a more measured life began in law school with his girlfriend Pam.

"One day she walked up to me and said, 'I signed us up to learn meditation with Marti,'" he said. While Rogers stuck with it, Pam quit. "She doesn't like to quiet down," he said of his now wife.

After graduating with a J.D. and M.S. in social psychology from the University of Florida, Rogers became a litigator in the Miami office of White & Case, the Park Avenue law firm. Over time, he gradually began adopting mindfulness into his legal practice.

While many of his opposing counsel entered a trial with a battle face on, Rogers would walk up to the opposing counsel and say, "We're in this together."

When his opponent was blasting off an argument, Rogers said he would sometimes respond by saying, "I see what your sayin' g."

“That can also be strategic,” he said, “because it can leave the opposing counsel assuming things they don’t know.”

By the time he left White & Case as a senior associate in 1999, Rogers said he had been practicing mindfulness for about 10 years. By 2007, he started a company called the Institute for Mindfulness Studies, aimed at working with lawyers. The same year, UM’s law school approached him about teaching a pilot mindfulness class. Today, he teaches three courses centered on Mindful Ethics and Mindful Leadership.

“This is all more than I ever expected,” he said.

George Knox, the director for professionalism and ethics at FIU College of Law, has found similar results.

“What we are discovering is that contemplative activities that allow people to focus upon the moment and allow people to release their own internal stress through such things as meditation and relaxation, reduce anger and allow for civil behavior between lawyers, even as adversaries,” he said.

While the law school does not offer separate classes in mindfulness, the concept permeates the curriculum, Knox said.

“My specialty at the law school is dispute resolution. The role of the lawyer has evolved. The lawyer is now seen as a problem solver, and not just an advocate,” said Knox, who will lead off the Feb. 27 conference at FIU.

Knox subscribes to what he calls the “The Common Enemy Theory,” that is, “instead of seeing the people involved in the problem as the enemy, we see the problem as the enemy, to be jointly attacked, cooperatively.”

In 2008, Rogers began teaching mindfulness to first-year law students at the UM in a series of classes he developed called Jurisight. Offered every Friday afternoon, and not for credit, the class was completely optional.

“I was asking students to show up on a Friday for a 90-minute class when most of their friends are getting extra studying done or are starting their weekend early,” he said.

The students came.

“It was probably the only time I ever felt relaxed during law school,” said Saren Williams, 24, a first-year law student who took Jurisight last semester.

Williams noticed how tightly wound she was, when after being in the classroom for 20 minutes, she hadn’t noticed that classical music had been playing. By the time finals came around, Williams found the breathing helped her make it through her law school finals.

“I remember sitting down to take my final exams, and I desperately tried to recreate Professor Rogers voice and tried the breathing techniques to relax myself,” she said.

Yana Mityaeva, 27, took Jurisight last year. She was a practicing attorney in Russia and enrolled at UM so she could take the bar exam in Florida.

With a smile on her face, she explained Rogers’ text message tactic: “Out of nowhere, he sends you a text message that says ‘breathe.’ And you’re ! like, ‘Oh my God, this arrived at exactly the right moment.’”

Science and research have begun to back up the principles of mindfulness. Rogers, for example, works with UM contemplative neuroscientist Amishi Jha. Together they form UM’s Mindfulness Research and Practice Initiative (MRPI), an inter-disciplinary collaboration across the university.

“Amishi does the research, and I do the practice,” Rogers says. Rogers said his colleagues have helped incorporate mindfulness into the campus by offering “mindful spaces.” Through a weekly calendar that is filled with short and long meditative activities, students can study law and practice mindfulness tailored to their area of study. Activities include “The Daily Constitutional,” a 30-minute walk around the campus lake with the law school dean, or the “Preliminary Hearing,” 15 minutes of listening to relaxing music.

Ryan, the guest! speaker at Saturday’s event, thinks mindfulness is spre! ading wa y beyond law schools. He makes his case in his latest book, *A Mindful Nation: How a simple practice can help us reduce stress, improve performance, and recapture the American spirit.*

Ryan outlines how the practice of mindfulness, if incorporated throughout the nation, could bring back an America where people were more civil, more community minded and more concerned about their neighbors.

In a telephone interview, Ryan shared his own path to mindfulness.

“In the middle of that summer [2008] — I was 35 at the time — I realized that if I kept up that pace I was going to burn out by the time I was 40.”

Two days after the 2008 presidential election, Ryan took off on a five-day mindfulness retreat with Jon Kabat-Zinn, founding executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

While five days doesn’t seem like a long time, Ryan said tha! t when you’re silent for most of that time, it’s plenty of time. Through mindfulness, he’s learned to be kinder to others, and to himself.

“We talk a lot about being kind to others, but I was many times my own worst critic. Sometimes that can be good, but oftentimes it is counter productive,” he said.

Like Rogers and Knox, Ryan also has found that mindfulness has helped him in his career.

“I’m on the budget committee and the chairman of the budget committee is Paul Ryan. Years ago, I would get really upset, and my remarks would have more than a hint of anger. Today instead of reacting with anger, I respond with humor, or a story that will better make my point or my side of the debate. And maybe somebody watching that debate on C-SPAN may be more open to my point of view because of the way I delivered it,” he said.

“There is a quiet revolution going on in America and it’s being led by the sci! entists.”

Copyright (c) 2013 The Miami Herald

Record Number: 201302050000KNRIDDERFLMIAMIH_cb38f1fcc7cdf4e4743b435687389ade