

“Staying Mindful When You’re Out on a Limb”

Reflections from a decade of trying

Opening Words: African proverb:

*Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up.
It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed.*

*Every morning a lion wakes up.
It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death.*

*It doesn't matter whether you are a lion or a gazelle.
When the sun comes up, you better start running.*

Staying mindful when you’re out on a limb

Observations from a decade of trying

I'll begin with a version of the golden rule from Sweet Honey and the Rock

“Shall I do unto others before they do unto me
Shall I arm myself to protect myself from harm and injury?
No, no that is not the message I learned at my mother's knee
When she told me to do unto others only what I'd have them do unto me”.

I appreciate the invitation to join you this morning. I'm going to share some thoughts about mindfulness in leadership, something I was not always successful at maintaining.

First, a disclaimer: While I'm speaking about leadership, not so much about politics, I acknowledge that my own political perspectives may come through. If your politics run redder or bluer than mine, I hope I don't go so far as to annoy you. If I do, perhaps you could speak with Gary about equal time from the pulpit.

Many of you work for social justice through elected office, your profession, volunteer social action or artistic expression. I imagine that you face a consistent balancing act between the goals and ideals that drive you and the need to maintain your personal balance, your sense of self, your internal grace. For many of us the need for change takes on the urgency of the parable of the race between the lion and the gazelle. It feels as if we are in a race against time. But, without a maintaining mindfulness we are less effective than we want and need to be.

I've spent a lot of time all over the state encouraging people to run for the legislature. People often recite to me all the reasons they think they couldn't run or serve in politics. The list usually includes things like,

- I don't know enough,
- I don't like conflict,
- I don't like speaking in front of people,
- I'm too old (or too young),
- I'm not patient enough,

- I'm not clever with sound-bites.

In fact, I tell them, those qualities make people well-suited to run for and serve in political office.

- It's a good thing when citizens come to the work of politics without thinking they have all the answers;
- when they listen before they speak;
- when their sense of purpose makes them at least slightly impatient;
- when they bring the insight or wisdom of age or youth
- when they are willing to work through complexity, not just craft sound-bites.

But, running for election and serving in office *does* require that we step out on a limb; that we reach outside ourselves, outside our own view of the world; that we take the risk of listening to others who have perspectives that are different from ours, the risk of speaking up even if we don't have all the answers, the risk of looking foolish when the changes we achieve are imperfect, the risk of disappointing our friends, the risk of losing an election.

I served as a member of the Vermont House for 12 years, four of them as Speaker. This was wonderful, meaningful, frustrating, rewarding, fun and hard work and I am grateful for having done it. Some of the work has been scary. Risky. I disappointed people. I made people angry. I made choices with incomplete information and imperfect outcomes. I stumbled in press statements. My Freyne nickname began as Lady Gaye and was downgraded to Simple Symington. I've won many elections, but not all of them.

Leadership requires both a sense of purpose and being willing to take risks. To take risks and maintain a sense of purpose requires a centering force, a "presence of mind". Some might call this God, others might call it love or grace, and there are probably other names for it. Mindfulness works for me.

- As Speaker of the House, I needed to stay mindful if I was to maintain and convey a sense of purpose when I was being bombarded with barriers and opposing forces.
- I needed to be mindful in order to stay focused on the challenges where my involvement mattered most, and to stay out of conflicts others could resolve without me.
- Mindfulness helped me convey a focused message in the face of the distraction of press notebooks, microphones and cameras.
- Mindfulness helped me keep a sense of humor or perspective in face of criticism or ridicule.
- Mindfulness also helped me keep my humility when lobbyists or editorial writers would complement me. Often their accolades were offered primarily as a way of reinforcing behavior that suited their purposes or their views of the world.
- Presence of mind helped me listen to people who saw the world differently than I did and appreciate what I have in common with my adversaries.

- o Mindfulness helps guide anger to a place of power, rather than allowing anger to become a distraction from effective work.
- o Staying mindful helped me listen to the Vermonters who cannot be present in the statehouse, or cannot afford to pay someone to be there for them.
- o Mindfulness guided me to stay in touch with the 149 other members of the House and that often required that I pro-actively make time for them since others – lobbyists, press, advocates, for example – would vie to fill up my daily calendar.
- o Mindfulness helped me do my work with grace rather than pretention.

Needless to say, I didn't always succeed at retaining mindfulness. I found it particularly difficult when I was running for Governor last summer and fall. But, to the extent that I was successful, what helped me keep my mindfulness through the noise and vulnerability of political leadership? My family, my faith, reminders to listen first, and to breathe.

1. My family, especially my children were my most immediate reminder of why I did the work of politics – my sense of purpose came from concern over the world we are passing on to future generations. But also my children helped me retain a sense of humility and a sense of humor about my work. No matter how great a piece of legislation was, I would be judged at home by whether I stayed awake all the way through the evening bedtime story or remembered what time and at what field to pick up my daughter from soccer. And, more than that, my children coached me not to take myself too seriously. As my three kids and I watched the re-run of my first speech as minority leader on tv I wondered how I could set aside my embarrassment enough to go into the statehouse the next day. I had tripped over my consonants and when I referenced my notes it looked as if I was shutting my eyes because the podium was very low. But, my children got me laughing and mimicking my eye motions in extremes. Sam, then 15, had cringed through the entire thing. But after it was over he looked up and said, "It's ok mom, you'll get better." His words really struck me. I figured that if a 15 year old could say that to his *mother*, the person who generally is the most embarrassing person to a 15 year old even when she isn't making a fool of herself on tv, I should be able to give myself that same space and move on.
2. Faith - The Golden Rule. The position of Speaker of the House is a powerful one from which to "*do unto others before they do unto me*", but I set out to lead the House with respect for minority voices and for my adversaries. This may have come from the fact that I had just been the minority leader, I was never the leader of the majority caucus. Also, in order to know "*what I'd have them do unto me*" I needed to be able to imagine what it would feel like to stand in someone else's shoes – someone with less direct access to power, someone who depends on assistance in order to maintain stable housing, good jobs, good health, someone with a more subdued voice.
3. Listen and breathe before speaking. A Speaker does his or her best work by listening attentively, not by speaking, and I worked to remind myself of that.

Taking a moment to breathe is important as well. For one thing, breathing gets oxygen flowing and that helps the brain do its job. One way I would make time for breathing was to sing. For me to sing the golden rule this morning I have to come into myself. I don't have a perfect voice, and if I become self-conscious about that I can't sing. If I let myself get distracted by conflicting thoughts or emotions, I won't be able to sing either. That's true for all of us to some extent – we have imperfect voices and lots of distractions, but we need to speak up or sing out anyway. My morning commute from Jericho to the statehouse was about 40 minutes and along the way I would transition away from the work of getting my teenagers up and to school and preparing the crock-pot dinner, to thinking about what was coming up that day or what had been in my e-mail box that morning. By the time I got to the Waterbury exit I was already in a full-fledged argument with some imaginary adversary over some aspect of the day ahead or yelling at the radio news version of yesterday's events. I used the Montpelier exit ramp as a reminder to breathe, to sing the golden rule out loud, to help me come into the statehouse ready to listen, not just act.

When I observe political leaders I look for how they keep centered or mindful.

Thirty years ago I had the chance to speak with Dr. Helen Caldicott, someone who was then and is still working against nuclear proliferation. I found the size of the challenge she was tackling so daunting I couldn't imagine getting out of bed each day to face work of that scale. I asked her how she kept at that work. She answered that her faith gave her the focus and the strength to do her work. I remember her answer because it caught me by surprise. In my early 20's, after a decade of not attending a church, I hadn't thought about faith as a source of strength for social action.

I loved David McCullough's biography of John Adams, our country's second president. McCullough conveys Adams' as a very human person, self-professed as "unsuited to the world of politics". He was impatient and could lose his way by becoming overly pompous and self-important. As vice president he would bore his senate colleagues with philosophical monologues and petty arguments over, for example, what title to use in addressing the President. But when his words were guided by his convictions *and* tempered by humility there was no voice as effective as his in conveying the innate freedoms on which the founding fathers declared the United States an independent country and established its constitution. He carried the day in garnering the unanimous support of congress for declaring independence.

What kept him mindful? John Adams said his wife and best friend, Abigail, was his ballast. He seemed most prone to lose his mindfulness when he was too long away from her. He also spoke about his daily prayers that "dispose me to bear with more composure some disagreeable circumstances that attend my situation."

I imagine that President Obama has more than a few of those "disagreeable circumstances that attend his situation". One of the things I find so compelling about Barack Obama is his composure, his clear sense of purpose and seeming lack of

pretention. He seems to always have his sights clear, his vision for the country at the ready. In analyzing his inaugural address last month, the New York Times listed words that he used frequently. They missed or decided not to highlight two words that I noticed even in just hearing him deliver the speech: Faith and Humility.

In fact, he began his address with the words, "My fellow citizens, I stand here humbled by the task before us..."

Humility makes politicians better listeners, better collaborators and more likely to focus on getting work accomplished rather than who gets credit for it. I hope President Obama will continue to place a value on humility throughout his presidency. Michele, Sasha and Malia will provide reminders that the measure of his success as a political leader can't come at the expense of the humility required to be a parent, and that is likely to carry over to his leadership.

Clearly, Obama is a man of faith and will rely on his faith as a source of strength. Faith is a source of mindfulness, as a tempering force against pretention, distraction, or personal gain. In The American Creed, A Biography of the Declaration of Independence Forrest Church argues that throughout its history America's leaders have recognized that our country is a union of faith and freedom, "in which faith elevates freedom and freedom tempers faith." Faith "protects freedom from itself, tempering excess of individual license by postulating a higher moral code..."

Faith helps us check our sense of direction before, like the lion and the gazelle, we simply begin running.

Faith and humility will help President Obama maintain the mindfulness he needs to lead our country in this time of crisis.

President Obama cannot do this work alone. He needs all of us – all those people who stood on the capitol mall or stopped in the tracks of their days to hear him last month - as partners in mindful and purposeful work to strengthen the world we pass on to generations who follow us.

We need our families, our faith, our listening and breathing, to help us to use our voices well in that work.