

The Populism of Jerry Brown

The Oakland, California, mayor hosts yoga classes for his community to create more enlightened citizens.



Jerry Brown? The former governor of California spent time at the Tassajara Zen Center just before he took office in 1975. When he began his work as governor, Brown continued to do the unprecedented. He promptly declined residency at the governor's mansion, choosing instead to live in a \$250-

Yoga teacher Catherine Cowsill leads weekly classes at We The People, Jerry Brown's waterfront home in Oakland, CA.

a-month apartment, and he preferred driving his Plymouth sedan to being chauffeured about in a limousine. As governor, Brown brought women and minorities into high government positions, made Cali-

fornia a leader at the time in solar energy, and legalized the practice of acupuncture. The erstwhile seminarian Jerry Brown, who later worked with Mother Theresa at her home for the dying in Calcutta, is a politician who brings meaning to the term "civil servant."

YOGA IS THE COMMON thread that draws them out of their homes and into a transformed warehouse space along the waterfront near Jack London Square in downtown Oakland, California: the baker, the graphic designer, the juggler, the artist and peace activist, the NIA teacher, the mayor's press secretary, and occasionally the city's mayor himself. Wooden floors have yet to be installed over the concrete in the building's stark auditorium, though there are, surprisingly, mirrors, and the vinyasa class raises heat enough on cool mornings for this loyal core of practitioners. They've traded the considered ambiance of neighboring yoga studios for the vision and spirit that infuse their practice here at We the People—Mayor Jerry Brown's communal home and public commons. Brown has extended an open invitation to the public to practice yoga at We the People every Wednesday morning at 8:00 A.M.

Who else would break new ground like this except

Now, as mayor of Oakland, Brown is working to reinvigorate this all-American city—ripe with diversity, challenges, and potential. His open-door policy to practice yoga is one of the many novel strategies he offers. "The concentration, the commitment of yoga is an individual and civic good," Brown explains. "You can't separate the physical from the mental, and yoga is a full expression of the total person. Yoga has a spiritual dimension and history that joins the meditative with the physical and that makes it unique. I wanted to make yoga available to the people of Oakland."

The Spiritual Tourist

BROWN DISCOVERED YOGA during perhaps the lowest point in his political career. After eight years as governor of California, he unsuccessfully sought the presidency. In 1984, he ran for the U.S. Senate but was defeated by Pete Wilson. For perhaps the first time in his political life, he didn't have anything external to

grasp. And so he turned his focus within.

By 1986, he was practicing Zen meditation with Yamada-roshi in Japan; he spent six months there. "Meditation opens the possibility to insight at levels that ordinarily would not be accessible," Brown says. The next year he traveled to India to work with Mother Theresa in Calcutta. "I wanted to see what she was doing. I found her to be an incredible leader, a very inspiring person," Brown recalls. "I worked with volunteers who

came from all over the world—Ireland, Australia, Japan, Germany. It was a wonderful opportunity. We helped people take their medicine, shower...the work was very direct and simple."

When he returned to the States, Brown met Bikram Choudhury at a gathering in Shirley MacLaine's home. Bikram demonstrated some yoga asanas, and Brown became eager to develop his own strength and flexibility. So he continued to shun the crazy heat of political races, this time in

favor of the sage sweat of a devoted asana practice.

Brown began his study of yoga under the guidance of the rigorous teacher Ana Forrest, whose studio, Forrest Circle, is located in Los Angeles. "Jerry possesses a clear and direct mindfulness, a burning, bright intellect," says Forrest. "He's a treasure of a yoga student because he is so interested, and his focus and drive challenge a teacher to stay on the mark." In conversations with Brown after class, Forrest was impressed with his candidness and ability to listen. "He wasn't at all what I'd expect from someone who has made politics his profession. He was not a proselytizer or a manipulator. He could really listen."

Brown studied with Forrest sporadically (whenever he was in L.A.) but diligently throughout 1989. Forrest recalls that she saw him progress during that

The seminary, Zen sitting, and yoga taught Brown that all such paths finally lead one way.

time, most notably as he learned to free the tension in his neck. "The neck connects your brain to your body, allowing your body's wisdom to travel up to your head. It's important to keep this channel open," she explains.

When Brown moved to San Francisco in 1990, he continued to study yoga with Tony Sanchez. He practiced Sanchez's Yoga Challenge, an adaptation of Bikram Yoga. Sanchez remembers Brown as a very strong person, both mentally and physically. Brown studied every day for the first two weeks and sustained regular attendance from three to five times a week for the next year and a half. After attending the beginner's level class, Sanchez recalls, Brown approached him and asked, "When is the expert's class?" "He wanted to challenge himself," says Sanchez. Although Brown couldn't assume all the poses, it did not stop him from trying. "He is driven to overcome obstacles. There's such an intensity to this

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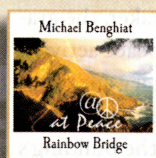
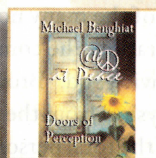
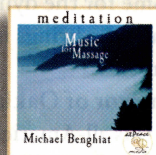
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this man. His mind moves so quickly, and he demands that his body follow. What I found most striking in Brown was his strong *tapas*, his fiery drive."

Sanchez and Brown shared some dinners while Brown studied with him. Like Forrest, Sanchez recalls his great intelligence. "You could talk to him about anything—politics, the environment, religious and spiritual questions. I felt as if I was talking to a walking encyclopedia. And he understood from his experiences

in the seminary, Zen sitting, and yoga that all such paths finally lead one way."

From Hatha to Karma Yoga

BY 1993, AFTER HE had lost his bid as Democratic presidential candidate to Bill Clinton, Brown redirected his unrelenting political passion locally—not to San Francisco, where he'd been living, but to Oakland. He bought and razed an old warehouse near Jack London Square and replaced it with a modest communal

living space, complete with rooftop vegetable gardens, auditorium, and radio studio. This became home for him and his latest venture, We the People.

Beginning with its call for campaign finance reform, We the People was originally founded as a nonprofit organization committed to discussing and planning ways to create healthy change in American society. In his populist radio show, also called "We the People," Brown hosted various philosophers, artists, activists, and public call-ins. Robert Thurman talked about Tibet and monasticism, Aitken Roshi spoke on Buddhism and peace activism, and Ernest Callenbach talked about ecotopia and voluntary simplicity. By 1998, Brown was elected mayor of Oakland with a landslide victory, recovering the political foothold he'd lost almost two decades earlier. We the People and Mayor Brown continue to evolve programs to educate people in shaping the

As the local is the building block of the nation, so is the personal the building block of the public.

places where they live. "The local community is the building block of the state and nation," Brown says. Similarly, the personal is the building block of the public, and so We the People will continue to host yoga classes for the community.

As Brown works to rejuvenate downtown Oakland with 10,000 new residents in apartment complexes being built along the waterfront, yoga teachers Catherine Cowsill and Ashley Sharpe plan for additional class time. This will offer Brown another time slot, for his mayoral responsibilities have curtailed the asana practice he once had. "It's my intention to return to a yoga practice," Brown insists. "But he *is* doing something to keep himself fit and strong," yoga teacher Cowsill points out. "He is working on his dharma, his core mission: a healthy commonwealth." ■

Copy Editor Vesela Simic believes a devoted study of yoga is bound to engender civic virtue.



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