

Vanity Fair: Chris Murphy Wants to Make America a Little Less Lonely

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CHRIS MURPHY HAD barely taken his seat at the head of the table when he was hit with a little history. “That’s Bobby Kennedy touring the Delta, and later he toured Appalachia,” Tim Nolan, a nurse practitioner on the front lines of the opioid epidemic in North Carolina, said as the senator looked down at the photo. Those trips in 1967 and 1968, Nolan said, sparked a “conversion,” awakening Kennedy to the crisis of poverty in America. “I hope your tour,” he told Murphy, “is as rich.”

It was a cool day in early August. Murphy—wearing striped socks, dark jeans, and a slate sport coat—seemed slightly uncomfortable with the comparison. He looked up to Kennedy. But he was not surveying shotgun shacks in Mississippi; he was sitting in an unassuming community center conference room on the outskirts of Boone, North Carolina, a college town about 100 miles northwest of Charlotte and a short drive from the Tennessee border. “I don’t think I could ever hold a candle to the work that he and others were doing,” he told me afterward. But for an ambitious New England Democrat in Appalachia, perhaps it was difficult to avoid the parallel. What, exactly, was the junior senator from Connecticut—best known for the decade-long gun safety crusade he launched after the Sandy Hook shooting—doing at this roundtable 400 miles from Washington and 700 from his home state, asking questions about opioids, struggling factory towns, loneliness, and the ills of social media?

“There are just real practical impacts to people feeling lonely and disconnected,” Murphy told the crowd of community leaders. “Political instability and polarization is driven by people feeling upset and angry when they can’t find positive connection and they go find it in darker, more dangerous places. But I think as I get older, and I get deeper into this job, I just have come to the conclusion that it’s not good enough for me just to kind of adjust the dials of public policy, and as a policymaker I have to step back and ask questions about how people are feeling.”

If you know Murphy, it’s probably as Capitol Hill’s conscience amid this country’s never-ending plague of gun violence. The guy giving impassioned Senate floor speeches calling on his colleagues to offer more than “thoughts and prayers” to the victims of the latest mass shooting. The guy who, after the Uvalde, Texas, massacre last year, pulled off what might

count as a political miracle in this era of profound polarization: the passage of a bipartisan gun safety bill, the most significant such legislation in three decades.

But Murphy, who was turning 50 that day in Boone, has lately become as passionate about the nation's need for what he calls a "spiritual renaissance" as he is about his signature issue. He hasn't abandoned that long-standing fight for a new one; he's significantly expanded the scope of it. "You can't spend 10 years thinking about violence in America," he had told me a month earlier, in his hideaway office, where he had hashed out much of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, "without trying to grapple with the underlying emotional state of a country in which people shoot first and think later."

The country appeared to him to be sickened somehow—in the throes of an amorphous ailment manifesting all across our culture and politics. And while the right was offering snake-oil cures, pushed by the most dangerous political huckster in recent American history, it seemed to Murphy that the left was treating the symptoms and ignoring the disease entirely. Worse yet, the malady was threatening to metastasize: Donald Trump was running to reclaim the White House on an explicitly authoritarian platform with help from the Republican allies whose politics of division had contributed to this national disorder. It had become Murphy's mission, as he put it, to "diagnose and treat the metaphysical state of America."

It's a big task, one not typically in the job description of a senator. It is also, by his own admission, politically fraught, and his efforts have already been met in some corners with resistance: In July, when he introduced the National Strategy for Social Connection Act—a bill that would, among other things, establish an "Office of Social Connection Policy" in the White House—the right cast Murphy as a big-government liberal working to mandate friendship through bureaucracy. There was also some suspicion from progressives, who bristled at the outreach to conservatives he considered necessary to his project.

He is convinced there is a growing "realignment" across the right and left around questions of "first principles, the good life," hints of which can be seen in the skepticism of Big Tech and neoliberalism that has been brewing on different sides of the political spectrum. He was taking something of a political trust fall—and had come to Boone not only in search of solutions, but to begin building a grassroots consensus around loneliness and disillusionment. "Some of what I'm doing is unfamiliar," he admitted. "What I'm trying to do is a little bit outside of the traditional sandbox that we tend to play in."

The question hovering above all of this, like the fog that had been hanging low over the Blue Ridge Mountains all day: Is Murphy a visionary rising star spending hard-earned political capital on an issue at the root of so many others? Or is he squandering it on a hobbyhorse—tapping not into a new phenomenon, but a worry about the future that every generation seems to indulge at one point or another?

A COUPLE WEEKS EARLIER, I was sitting with Murphy at the Monocle, an old-school bar in the shadow of the Capitol. The senator had a Tito's and soda with a splash of cranberry juice. Sinatra crooned from the speakers, and the conversation turned to God.

Murphy had just cowritten an op-ed with philosopher Ian Marcus Corbin, who has become a friend of his, calling for a “spiritual renaissance” in America, particularly on the left. I was curious as to whether he was religious. He isn't, exactly. Murphy had been part of youth ministry as a high schooler. As an adult, he still isn't quite sure what he believes. For the last six months, though, he has been attending church regularly again. He's enjoyed getting back into the rituals—“I forgot how comforting they are,” he told me. But more importantly, he believes that houses of worship could play a crucial role in strengthening community bonds and the common good. “All our other temples—social media, consumerism, a ‘me first’ individualism—are just telling you to be you.”

That includes what Murphy describes as a “culture of therapy,” which he believes has had its benefits but is also encouraging Americans to “look only inwards to address the anxieties of life” rather than outward at “structural unhappiness” in the country. “There have been decisions by governments that have caused our social fabric to disintegrate,” Murphy told me later, describing more systemic issues weighing on the nation's psyche. “And I think people on the right and the left are really unhappy with that.”

He had come to this conclusion about a year earlier, not long after the biggest legislative victory of his career. The movement he had arguably been the congressional face of since the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting—which occurred in the Connecticut district he then represented in Congress—had broken a three-decade logjam. The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, and several other Democratic accomplishments in the first stretch of Joe Biden's presidency, should have been a major cause for celebration. “And yet, people weren't feeling any better,” Murphy recalled. “The national mood seemed very stuck.”

The symptoms of that malaise seemed especially acute to him in the lives of kids, who he had seen “disappearing into their phones...being co-opted by this all-consuming consumer culture.” They seem to “feel the weight of the world on their shoulders and have

less sort of optimism and hope than my generation did,” Murphy told me. “It’s not a coincidence that I’m thinking a lot more about the emotional health of the country as my kids get closer to adulthood,” he added. “I’m worried about the world that they are walking into.”

We live in a period of rapidly advancing technology—some of which is being decried as a threat to human existence by the very people pushing it forward—and looming climate disaster. We also live in a country in which democracy may be running out of runway. Polls today paint a picture of a nation gripped by anxiety, depression, and uncertainty. The surgeon general’s advisory on loneliness, issued in May of this year, noted that Americans are spending more time alone than they were two decades ago, have fewer close friends, and trust each other and institutions far less than they did half a century ago. And while Americans might not agree on much ideologically, they do all seem united in their pessimism with politics: In an August New York Times poll, nearly two thirds of respondents said that the country was headed in the “wrong direction.” Just 23 percent said it was on the right track.

Much of the ennui was surely brought on by the pandemic, but things have been trending this way for a while: Back in 2000, Robert D. Putnam warned in *Bowling Alone* of a sharp decline in civic and community involvement, that the bonds that once held us together seemed to be breaking. It seems to Murphy that those ties—the ones he’d watched hold a tragedy-scarred Newtown together after Sandy Hook—are now in danger of being ripped apart completely. The problem runs deeper than infrastructure or climate change or even gun safety: Americans are “worn out,” “overwhelmed,” and their leadership feels “mechanical,” he told me. “The project of trying to address this unspooling of America that’s happened is really enormous,” Murphy said. “And I think that that’s caused a lot of leaders to just not try.”

MURPHY GREW UP in Wethersfield, Connecticut—the same town where his parents met in high school. His father’s family, he said, went back generations and was well-off. But his mother lived in public housing in nearby New Britain and moved to town when she was in elementary school. “My mother always reminded me that her life was very different than my life,” Murphy told me. “That was very formative for me—the understanding of just how lucky I was.”

His good fortune, as he saw it, came with a civic obligation—a “responsibility to serve”—and politics seemed a natural way to fulfill it. “I think I was just kind of an organizer out of the womb,” he said.

But he struggled upon arriving at Williams College in Massachusetts for undergrad: He was “overwhelmed from the start” academically, he told me, and lost his race for freshman representative to the college council. I “got skunked,” he recalled. “I was definitely on my back feet, sort of wondering whether I was good enough to continue to pursue the things I wanted to pursue, which was a life in public service.”

Then he read *What It Takes*, the late Richard Ben Cramer’s classic on the inner lives of 1988 presidential aspirants, which Murphy describes as “the most important book” he’s ever read: “That book just knocked me off my feet,” he said. “I was once again hooked by this idea that there was a nobleness to public service.” (Murphy now gifts the book to each of his Senate interns every year: “I think that I, today, probably contribute 50 percent of the proceeds to Richard Ben Cramer’s estate,” Murphy joked. “I buy, like, 60 copies of *What It Takes* every year.)

Murphy was elected to the Connecticut House of Representatives at 25, the state Senate at 29, and the United States Congress at 33. But while Murphy was a talented politician, he was not particularly ideological or especially well-known when he mounted a run for the Senate seat Joe Lieberman was vacating in 2012. “He was really a backbencher in Congress,” said Gary Rose, a professor of political science at Sacred Heart University who wrote a book on the 2012 Senate race, in which Murphy defeated former WWE CEO Linda McMahon. “He was not considered a major force.”

Sandy Hook changed that. “My life took a hard about-face,” Murphy wrote in his 2020 book, *The Violence Inside Us*. “I now had my calling...my mission in life.” He would spend the next decade in the Senate fighting the formidable gun lobby and helping build a movement that is starting to prove equally formidable.

“He was an extraordinary quarterback,” Senator Cory Booker, one of his closest friends in the Senate, told me. “He was just a Joe Montana-type tactician working the ball down the field and did something a lot of people can’t speak to as a senator, which is putting points on the board.” Or maybe he was more like a hockey player, with a “real ability to see around corners and see ahead for where the puck is going, not where it is right now,” as Senator Richard Blumenthal, his fellow Nutmegger, described him. Or perhaps more of a point guard? “He’s been amazing to watch,” says Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr,

an admirer of Murphy's who told me his own gun safety activism—which included an impassioned pregame speech after Uvalde—has been inspired by the Connecticut senator. “I think the hope is that we are going to tip the scales as a country, where we can actually get a group of like-minded government officials to make some real change.”

Of course, Murphy remains committed to that change. He's still in regular contact with grassroots leaders, as well as the Sandy Hook families he met in the immediate aftermath of that tragedy—some of whom he counts among his closest friends. “He is just as dedicated, just as smart, just as compassionate, just as genuine as the Chris Murphy you see in the United States Senate,” said Mark Barden, whose seven-year-old son, Daniel, was killed at Sandy Hook. “He just seems like one of the most genuine politicians I've ever met,” said Sari Kaufman, a Parkland survivor who was an intern in Murphy's office at the time of the Uvalde shooting and describes the senator as a personal hero. “It's like knowing that you have a teammate in the most important place you can have one.”

But his political identity is evolving. The success of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act lent him a new degree of political capital, earned him credibility with some Republicans, and has made the senator a key surrogate for Biden's reelection campaign. The president worked closely with Murphy on the legislation, appearing with him at a June summit the senator hosted in Hartford commemorating the one-year anniversary of its enactment. Murphy is a “national leader,” Minnesota attorney general Keith Ellison, who served in Congress with Murphy, told me on the sidelines of the Safer Communities Summit in June. “This guy has it all.”

Now, Murphy is trying to leverage his rising star to combat the Great Unraveling. He read cultural critiques from across the political spectrum, from Patrick Deneen to Michael Sandel. He returned to Alexis de Tocqueville, who he feels has been “particularly relevant to this question of the stitches that keep America together.” And he reached out to philosophers, including Corbin, a research affiliate at the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University and a senior fellow at the nonpartisan think tank Capita, which hosted the roundtable discussion in Boone. “Our understanding at the time was that it was going to be a policy call, that the senator was interested in finding ways that the federal government can mitigate some of these problems that we're seeing,” Corbin told me. “Then, on the call, I think the first words that Chris said were, ‘I need to figure out how to talk about metaphysics on the Senate floor.’”

He gave it a more official shot in June, when he took to the floor—where he'd delivered some of his most impassioned speeches—to talk about loneliness. "I really believe Congress can get something done," he told his colleagues. "Right now, I'd argue we just need a starting point."

A COUPLE WEEKS later, he told me what that starting point could be: legislation calling for a sweeping national strategy to address the crisis. He had already hinted at it, both in his floor speech and in a series of essays he had been publishing over the past several months, which he said had led to "more interesting and louder feedback" than anything else he had published as a senator. "It struck a nerve," he told me. He already has some allies within his party—Minnesota senator Tina Smith, who has been outspoken about her own experience with depression and has put forth a bill of her own to address loneliness among seniors, citing the COVID-19 pandemic as a factor, would cosponsor the bill—but admitted that he would need to do more to build support both on the Hill and outside of Washington. That would include, he said, some outreach to Republicans whose views on issues like economic nationalism, technology, and social media seemed to align with his cause.

As we talked, a man came over to our table—he and his husband were visiting the Capitol from Connecticut, he said, and he just wanted to tell his senator that he was "grateful" for the work he had done. "God bless you," the man told him. The man didn't say exactly what work he was talking about, but I wondered if, in his effort to find common cause with rightwing senators like J.D. Vance on certain issues, Murphy risked alienating constituents like this, who had come to know him as a key ally in the Senate on gun control and other progressive causes. "He's asking the right questions and reaching out in really constructive ways to folks all over the political spectrum," Oren Cass, a former adviser to Mitt Romney and a leading conservative critic of neoliberalism, told me. "I'm just very curious to know what his compatriots in the Democratic Party or left of center are going to do with that."

Murphy himself has his doubts. "I don't know that I'm the right person to foster a conversation about the spiritual health of the country," he told me in one conversation. "This might be beyond my capacities."

But it seems that he has at the very least gotten at something important: If it felt, in the Trump years, as though the country was imploding, it seems that Americans are now living in the wreckage. Could Murphy be to that national weariness something like what Bobby Kennedy was to poverty? It's hard to say. The kind of earnestness and ambition of his effort

had been so absent from our politics as to seem quaint. But he had already pulled off one remarkable political feat on gun reform. Maybe he could do it again? “It’s said about athletes—you can see an athlete when they are in the zone,” said Booker. “And Chris Murphy is living that kind of authentic life right now, where he is finding his zone.”

For the most part, his bill to address social isolation—which, as Jillian Racoosin, executive director of the Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness, said was unprecedented in the United States in its scope—was well-received save for some mockery from the online right. “Senator Murphy’s proposal is an important and needed policy step forward,” Laurie Santos, a professor of psychology at Yale University and host of the popular Happiness Lab podcast, told me. “We need more leaders in government like Senator Murphy, who recognize just how common and consequential loneliness is and recognize that there is a role for government in helping support communities and building stronger connections,” echoed Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, whose May advisory on loneliness helped form the framework for Murphy’s legislation. But some of Murphy’s messaging around the issue seemed to draw strong negative reactions online, which he told me he was paying more attention to this time around.

In July, for instance, he wondered on Twitter—which he himself operates with little to no staff input, to their occasional chagrin—if it would “be a good idea to have [social conservatives] a part of a Democratic/left coalition and accept a bit more intra-movement friction on culture issues as a consequence.” Pushback quickly followed. “Whose rights is it acceptable to bargain away?” the prominent Twitter journalist Aaron Rugar responded. “Women? LGBTs? Minorities?”

“I knew what I was doing,” Murphy told me of the post in question, which he had published while at the beach with his family: He was testing the waters, trying to get a sense of what direction the currents were headed.

He stirred up a similar backlash ahead of his trip to North Carolina: Liberals online suggested he had lost the plot, while conservatives noted that Boone—which he described as the “heart of Southern Appalachia”—was more of a hippie college town than the red, rural community “wrecked by disappearing quality jobs, increasing drug addiction, and epidemic levels of loneliness” he cast it as. In fact, the organizers had initially intended to host the roundtable in conservative Wilkesboro, more politically representative of the region, but became concerned that participants would be unwilling to meet with a Democratic senator from Connecticut there.

WHEN MURPHY ARRIVED at the roundtable, he was seated with a range of local leaders from the region, as well as members of Murphy's staff, Corbin, and Richard Reeves, a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institute and president of the American Institute for Boys and Men, whose 2022 book Murphy read and publicly praised in July. At one end was a small stage; at the other, a kitchen with demo mirrors for cooking classes. Through slats of the cloth blinds, a heavy rain was falling. The conversation was heavy too: They talked about the opioid crisis in Appalachia; about the furniture industry that the region once relied on, and the economic precarity it had left in its wake. They talked about technology that was supposedly meant to connect us—phones a local pastor dubbed “isolating devices”—but instead seemed to drive everyone further apart. They talked about what it was like to be a queer kid and an immigrant—especially an undocumented immigrant—in Appalachia. They talked about a country that was deeply “broken” but whose leaders appeared willing to treat only the surface-level symptoms of the disorder. “If dudes ran around breaking legs, we wouldn't just keep [putting them in casts],” said LB Pevette, a queer advocate in Appalachia and owner of a Wilkesboro cocktail bar. We would try, Pevette said, to figure out what the deal was with all the leg breaking.

The conversation tapped right into that sense of “powerlessness,” Murphy said, that a lot of Americans are feeling. But what, I wondered, was he going to do with all this? How could he translate such varied concerns into policy? That's hard to say, a senior Murphy staffer told me after the Boone roundtable. Even though Murphy and his team had been working on this project for the better part of a year now, they were still trying to get a feel for the contours of the issue—which is challenging, they said, but also exciting. “Chris is a different kind of lawmaker than anyone I've worked with,” the staffer told me. “It's a thrill.”

The roundtable wrapped, and we headed for dinner. It was locals night at Hellbender Bed & Beverage—\$12 for a discounted burger and a beer—in Blowing Rock, a nearby tourist town popular with Floridians fleeing all the snowbirds. We weren't locals, but Capita cofounder Joe Waters was, and he served as a capable tour guide as he drove us over, meeting Murphy's every question—and he had a lot—with an interesting answer. He gave us some history about the Blue Ridge Parkway, which was slick with rain and still veiled by a low-hanging fog. He gave us a primer on the tensions between Appalachian State University and the longtime locals, who said they were increasingly being priced out of the area. He told us about the Wild West show at the Tweetsie Railroad, a bit of frontier kitsch we rode past. “It's a part of our history that people have forgotten,” Murphy marveled. “All

these small, little permanent amusement parks where people went on, like, Thursday nights.”

Half of Waters’ SUV was taken up by a car seat, and the floor was coated in dog hair. Murphy had two cats, but he and his wife, Cathy, had narrowly avoided getting a dog: “We have enough without a dog,” he said, “especially when we live in two places.”

During Murphy’s time in Congress, the family had mostly resided in Connecticut, with Murphy traveling back and forth to DC for work. That had made him, as he recalled in his book, something of an “absentee husband and father.” Cathy, traveling with Murphy that day, remembers their oldest son, now 15, circling days of the calendar when his father would actually be home. Moving to Washington had allowed them to be a normal family in most respects, Cathy told me—Murphy coached Little League and participated in the PTA—but they seemed to me not entirely comfortable in their adopted hometown: They had both grown up in Connecticut. Their roots were there. But the demands of DC always seem to be beckoning.

Murphy freely admits to being a picky eater and “addicted” to Diet Mountain Dew, which he surreptitiously drinks from a coffee cup. (The senator’s palate, as one staffer put it, is like that of a “14-year-old.”) Along with his dinner, a chicken sandwich and vodka soda, Murphy received for his birthday a can of Hard Mountain Dew, which he disliked. Later, on the way to get ice cream, Corbin asked Cathy how she would feel about the prospect of being married to a presidential candidate. “I’ll just stay married to Chris,” she replied as her husband ordered himself a double scoop.

Bobby Kennedy—who was said to have been left “ashen faced” with horror at what he saw during his tour of the Delta and Appalachia—announced his 1968 presidential campaign not long after. But Murphy isn’t so sure. His kids are still young. And besides, he has finally, after a decade, started to figure out how to navigate the Senate. “It’s silly to rule anything out in the future,” Murphy told me later. “I spent a big portion of my life looking for and running for the next thing,” he added. “As hard as it is to believe, given how many senators end up running for something else, I’m really happy in this job.” But that doesn’t mean he isn’t looking at the future. In a gig that is “constantly inflicted by short-termism,” he told me, he’s planning “for the next 10 to 15 years.”