

Introduction

This collection is based on a series of conversations from the *Mind of State* podcast (2019–2021), untangling stories that make up our daily news diet. This diet overstuffs us with details of culture wars, political stalemates, and legislative stunt shows—essentially infotainment mixed with serious reports of our rapidly deteriorating climate, increasing tensions between identity groups, and our diminishing trust in facts and data—such that we begin to lose sight of what is real and true. How do we take all this in, never mind make sense of any of it? How do we contend with our growing fear that we just might be headed for oblivion—either through nuclear war, pandemic, climate change, or a combination of all three?

Our goal with *Mind of State* is to attempt to make sense of such sociopolitical nonsense by exploring the relationships between psychology and politics in contemporary American society. This approach is not easy; so much of what is called political is, in fact, psychological, and so much of what is psychological has become political. The boundaries between the two are porous and yet, when you talk to politicians about psychology, they go blank—and when you try to talk to psychologists about politics, they share the human tendency to veer towards the dogmatic. The reality is a paradox: politics and psychology are all mixed up with one another and, at the same time, conversations about politics and psychology mix like oil and water. In spite of this, we committed to having such an exchange many times over. Across 29 episodes, we did our best to tease out and better understand the intersection of what we like to call *psyche* and *polis*, or psychology and politics. In the process, we found that it is highly useful, if not critical, to ask questions that show just how mutually influential psychology and politics are. Questions like: Why do we vote for the people we vote for? What emotions drive our political behavior? And how might this allow—or prevent—from fruitfully living together?

Relevance

Why go to the trouble of putting a book together now, based on conversations that occurred three or four years ago? What possible relevance could they have today?

Certainly, the monumental events of the recent past—be it the COVID-19 pandemic, George Floyd’s murder, the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, a myriad of climate disasters, or the January 6, 2021 white-nationalist-led insurrection—all of it can start to blur. We have difficulty holding on to them; they can be poorly remembered. Did they occur in the distant past, or just yesterday? This is likely a consequence of our flooded mental and emotional states—the quick sequence and convergence of historical cataclysms are overwhelming, such that one catastrophe can quickly cancel out our memory of the last. We begin to live in an eternal *now*—lurching from moment to moment between dramatic occurrences lacking meaning since they feel disconnected from past or future. Or, our anxious desire compels us to quickly move on; we give ourselves no time to reflect.

Yet, it is crucial to create the space to remember, and that is why these episodes became a book. Only by remembering can we make meaning out of all that is happening to us. Thus, we spent a good deal of time going back to think about the relevance of these conversations from 2019–2021, and we discovered that they remain not only highly relevant, but also, at times, even prescient. This may be because at the core, most of the issues our society struggles with are thematic and remain unchanged. So although the details of an issue’s specific context may have evolved, its underlying resonance remains as timely today as it did a few years ago.

Circumambulation

Considering the mutual impact of psyche and polis, we made a key discovery from these conversations we started four years ago: perhaps the best way to untangle the vexing, interrelated problems we now face in the U.S. is to circle around them again and again. Only then can themes and patterns be recognized because to make sense of difficult and seemingly unanswerable psycho-political questions, time is required—and lots of it.

To fully appreciate the individual topics and consider how their various themes are interwoven, we needed to go over our questions and responses at different times—to see them from different angles and various perspectives.

By engaging in such a process, we recognized previously unseen links, not only within one conversation, but also between various episodes as well. One example—among many—of the interconnections we discovered, is the braiding together of conspiracism, mass shootings, and racism. Only upon our return to them, and only by considering all 29 together as a whole, have these *Mind of State* episodes revealed multiple layers of meaning that were not as apparent when we first recorded them.

We call this approach *circumambulation*—a form of repeatedly walking around the same issues until a sharper picture emerges that embraces the complexity and multidimensional answers to thorny, vexing questions. Here are the major arenas of concern that emerged for us after *circumambulating* the interviews, individually and as a whole:

- Acknowledging Death, Trauma, Loss
- Why Truth Matters
- Anxieties of Race and Dominance
- Democracy at Risk
- The Importance of Myth in Politics

We organized this book into sections based on these themes and made each of the podcast transcriptions an individual chapter and placed it in one of the sections. Often, an individual conversation chapter could have easily gone into a different section, as the themes inevitably overlap. While our choices could be debated, we created this structure to organize the myriad topics and to show the connections. To further aid in organizing and locating these discussions in time, we also created a visual timeline to graphically represent the intermingling of cascading events with the conversations we were having about them. This was all to serve our goal—and frankly, our yearning—to make meaning and sense of psychopolitical nonsense.

On Conversation

We would be remiss not to share an essential observation we made in our circumambulations around these *Mind of State* episodes: the benefits—if not to say the gifts—of conversation itself. We found that when facing opaque, charged, and consternating sociopolitical issues, engaging with others in dialogue is a highly useful tool for distilling and digesting what is extremely difficult to think about alone. These dialogues and what they contain were

spontaneous co-creations between people who cared, not only about the topic we came together to discuss, but also about the exchange itself. We cared about hearing from each other, sharing our thoughts and grappling with our confusions in a forum of respect and openness. Moreover, we cared to invite listeners to think right along with us.

While rereading these transcripts and listening again to the conversations, we were struck by the fact that while each episode featured an expert guest—whose ideas and writings we were eager to explore—there isn't one “author” to any of these discussions. Instead, each episode was an improvisational trio—or, sometimes, a quartet—in which we, along with our guest, interwove the themes and attitudes of psyche and polis, without taking sides. What was—and is—delightful was that some of our most politically minded guests came up with the most psychologically astute insights, and some of our most psychological experts issued extremely political assessments. In many cases, this interplay of psychological and political perspectives allowed us each to make surprising connections, syntheses—and even some groaningly bad puns—that we would not have otherwise come up with. These collaborative exchanges could not be reproduced—and this is the ephemeral beauty of conversation, of dialectic, of making links together. Taking a step back to look at this series of sand-painting-like collaborations, we see these conversations as microcosms and models of collective expression, which we, as a society and a democracy, seem to both crave—and yet also be in danger of losing.

Reflection as Prayer

Over time, the spirit of this book has also been informed by words of the Polish Nobel Prize-winning novelist Olga Tokarczuk, who wrote in *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*:

It's a good thing that God, if he exists, and even if he doesn't gives us a place where we can think in peace. Perhaps that's the whole point of prayer—to think to yourself in peace, to want nothing, to ask for nothing.¹

¹ Tokarczuk, O. (2018). *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*. (A. Lloyd-Jones, Trans.) Penguin Random House. p. 232.

Tokarczuk unveiled to us that our larger goal in putting this book together has been to create a place where we can think in peace—where we have room to think. Thinking in peace truly becomes a form of prayer, whether a God or gods exist or not. Our American tendency—perhaps informed by our historical traumas—is to discard or forget anything from the past,² and we seem to be adopting increasingly ahistorical mindsets. Perhaps this is why Heather Cox Richardson’s *Letters from an American* have become so popular, as a compensation for our “mindless now.” She, too, has carved out time and space to seek perspective and contemporary relevance in our past history, which again, allows for thinking and reflection. This is the goal of this published collection of conversations as well. For in our reconsiderations, we have discovered that thinking and reflection are essential to fostering spiritual health, which in turn promotes individual and collective growth and well-being. Given the stagnation and fragmentation created by the psychopolitical and environmental extremes of these times, nurturing the strength and compassion of our human spirit is necessary now, more than ever.

² See our conversations with Pauline Boss in Chapter 3 and Betty Sue Flowers in Chapter 27.