

“The Case For Radical Openness” Transcript



Guest: Dr. Anton Hart

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Betty Teng: Welcome to Mind of State, a podcast for both political junkies and armchair shrinks. I’m psychoanalyst and trauma therapist, Betty Teng.

Jonathan Kopp: And I’m communications strategist and political hack, Jonathan Kopp. Join us as we welcome experts in politics and psychology to consider this: the state of our nation through the state of our minds and the mind of our state. Hi Betty.

Betty: Hi Jonathan.

Jonathan: You know, on this week’s episode of Mind of State, our guest is your colleague, Dr. Anton Hart.

Betty: Right. He’s my supervising psychoanalyst.

Jonathan: So tell us, from your perspective, why is Anton Hart a guest of Mind of State?

Betty: You know, Jonathan, I know we are two psychoanalysts squaring off against you, the political strategist, so you're outnumbered in this episode.

Jonathan: You got me outnumbered two to one.

Betty: We go heavy on the mind. But the thing that inspired me to ask Anton was actually a political quote from Biden at his Gettysburg speech quoting Lincoln, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." And then later in other places on the stump, he's quoted Obama, "How do we go forward not as red states, not as blue states, but as the United States." And this feels like a real hard challenge these days and I see that in the micro with my patients who can't talk to relatives anymore about politics—

Jonathan: For sure.

Betty: —or about their thoughts. And I think this flexes, you know, micro to macro, like how do we go forward. And really, like, this thing about radical openness, which we'll talk with Anton about, seems to be a way. Now, it gets clinically heavy, so I'm going to ask our listeners to bear with us, but I think we bear fruits. Don't you think we bear fruit, Jonathan?

Jonathan: I do actually, Betty.

Betty: And you help.

Jonathan: Look, I pledge this to our listeners. For those of you who are coming from the state side of Mind of State, bear with us because while it starts out heavy psychoanalytic, we bridge.

Betty: And if I might add, we're both about, you and I, Jonathan, communication. But communication in a very different way. You're public communication, I'm very private communication. And how do we do that is sort of our venn diagram overlap. It's like how do we talk to each other? How do we listen to each other? What language do we use?

Jonathan: You know, the psychoanalytic concepts and theories immediately have a direct application in our political context, in discourse, and in other societal settings. So I think this is a great time to bring on our guest. Dr. Anton Hart is a training and supervising psychoanalyst at the William Alanson White Institute in New York. He's a member of Black Psychoanalysts Speak and serves as co-chair of the Holmes Commission on Racial Equality in the American Psychoanalytic Association. Dr. Hart is on the faculty at Mount Sinai Hospital and various psychoanalytic institutes in New York, Cleveland, and Philadelphia. He's also in full time private practice. Welcome to Mind of State, Anton.

Anton Hart: Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Jonathan: You know, we wanted to bring you on to Mind of State to talk about this notion that you have put forth about radical openness. Now, would you start out by defining radical openness?

Anton: Radical openness is a concept that I have been developing that pertains to the situation of psychoanalytic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. And it has to do with how the analyst or therapist listens to the patient and how the analyst or therapist takes in what the patient says and thinks and feels and gives it serious consideration, being as radically open as possible to the truths that reside in the patient's experience. What that winds up

meaning is that rather than focusing primarily on the traditional notions of transference in the psychotherapeutic process, meaning that the patient is bringing things from their past into the present moment with the analyst, radical openness proposes the idea that the analyst could be listening as if the patient is going to be telling something that is true, even and particularly if, it sounds strange to the analyst. It sounds foreign. It sounds like it's coming from someplace else. It's at those times that the analyst could really listen in a different way, which involves allowing for what the patient says to sit with them and to affect them both cognitively and emotionally, so that the truth that resides in what the patient is saying and experiencing could really be considered, even if it seems like distortion, even if it seems like projection.

Jonathan: First, I'm a little curious just because I'm not a psychoanalyst, it sounds funny to me, frankly, that the notion of listening to a patient and taking their words at face value would be a departure from the traditional approach of psychoanalysis. And by the way, if you hear sirens in the background, it's not them coming for me, it's just life in New York City. But, I mean, either Betty or Anton, talk to me about how listening with radical openness is different than listening in the psychoanalytic tradition.

Anton: Well, Jonathan, I want to be clear, it's not the same as taking things at face value that I'm proposing. It's taking things seriously, taking them to heart, if you will. Sometimes patients say things to their therapists, their analysts that seem like distortions. And there's been this whole body of thought in the psychoanalytic perspective which says we're trying to listen for those distortions. We're trying to listen for what the patient is importing into the analytic relationship. And through our noticing the ways that the patient is seeing us, that we're really actually not, we can learn something about the patient's conflicts, issues, dynamics, history, and traumas. Radical openness

proposes an alternative or a counterpart to this way of viewing things. It says that there are two people in the room and both of them have unconscious mental life, not just the patient. And because of that, neither participant in the therapeutic process could be the ultimate arbiter of what's going on and what's true. And instead, the analyst could do well to listen in such a way that takes very seriously the strange things that the patient tells the analyst about him, her, or their self. That means I have to sit with things that feel like they have nothing to do with me, have an open mind with the feeling that they could have something to do with me. Almost like the patient is my therapist, the patient is my analyst, and the patient may have access to things about myself that I don't have access to by virtue of my human unconsciousness.

Betty: Now, Anton, something out of what you're saying, which is really taking it down to basics to me is that there are two very different people in the room and they are coming from very different perspectives and different experiences, whatever their identities are. And that this radical openness proposes a certain kind of a bridge, a way to sort of say that, you know, I don't assume that I know anything about you. You're telling me something. And I, as the therapist, and you, as the patient, we're entering into an environment where we're gonna have a conversation where we get down to those basics and try to bridge that gap. We talk to different people all the time, you and I, Anton, and Jonathan, you do too, as a political strategist. You know, you're talking, Jonathan, in a very public way. Anton and I talk in a very private way. Is radical openness a means to acknowledge how different we are from the other?

Anton: Yeah, sure, Betty. So you're onto something. You've captured something about the essence of radical openness. It's derived from Gadamerian hermeneutic theory.

Jonathan: Wow, wow.

Anton: Hans-Georg Gadamer is a philosopher who is arguably the father of hermeneutics in philosophy. And Gadamer has a lot to say about the process of understanding oneself and understanding other people and understanding text, originally, and said, when you read a piece of text, a book, an article, a newspaper, a scripture, anything, read not just what's on the page, but what surrounds it, what its context is. Who wrote it? Who are they speaking to? Who is ignored and marginalized in this speech act? Who is included? What kind of knowledge is privileged? What kind is ignored? Things like that are part of the hermeneutic orientation. And then hermeneutics puts itself on the track of dialogue and dialogue becomes this important thing. We enter into dialogues in order to more fully understand others, but also to understand ourselves. And we can't understand ourselves unless we're in conversation from this perspective. So, Betty, you're talking about finding a way of bridging and hermeneutics talks about the fusion of dialogic horizons. That's just a fancy way of saying, as we enter into conversation with each other, as we find ways to listen to each other without presumption, without foreknowledge, as Gadamer put it, and as we speak to each other with the other in mind as we're speaking, our horizons start to fuse. We start to become part of each other, entangled with each other, if you will, emotionally, psychologically. It's not simply that we understand the content better of what the other person is saying. We start to actually be changed by the kind of listening and speaking that we do when we genuinely enter into dialogue. So that's the crucial thing and that is a kind of bridging. And hermeneutics says one more thing, I don't want to go on too long, but hermeneutics says what we do when we enter into a genuine conversation is we try to think about not what we can gain, what we can do, not what

knowledge we can get from the other person. Instead, it asks us to consider what we can lose as we participate in the conversation. What can we relinquish that we thought we knew? What kind of foreknowledge, what kinds of presumptions, what kind of prejudices can we loosen our grasp on and let go of as we try to take in the other person?

Jonathan: So first, I definitely did not have hermeneutics on my bingo card for today. So I appreciate you bringing a new word to my consciousness. I'm open to it. I'm radically open to it. And importantly, what I'm hearing is that when you say openness, it sounds like what you're really referring to is opening your own mind and opening your own thought process to the other person's ideas and context and letting that permeate into your mind. Radical openness is your mind's openness to the other person's words and context, rather than being open about your own thoughts to someone else.

Anton: Precisely. Radical openness has nothing to do with being extra self-disclosing. It has to do with being open to the other. And, as you put it, their words, their thoughts, their context. And, I would add to that list, their being, like being open to the other's being as another human subject who you can listen to and take into your care as you're listening. That's a term that I like to use that comes from another philosopher. The idea there is I listen, taking what the other says, feels, thinks, into my care, and in taking it into my care, I'm a different kind of listener than the listener I might be if I'm just trying to listen to the argument that the person is making so that I can come up with a reply, or come up with a counter argument, or a rebuttal, or something like that.

Jonathan: So by taking what they say into your care, to me that suggests a duty of trust, a responsibility to give a benefit of the doubt, perhaps to the

person to whom you're listening.

Anton: Yeah.

Jonathan: In other words, bringing a respect, a dignity to what they're saying rather than a prejudgment or a critical analysis, but rather giving full consideration to the things that the other person is saying.

Anton: Yes, full consideration, both intellectually and emotionally. That's precisely right. The second philosopher that I was referring to is Emmanuel Levinas. And Levinas said that when we turn toward the face of the other, we feel a calling, an ethical calling, to really respectfully, openly, and caringly take the other's experience into our consideration, into our care. And that amounts to, just as you're describing, a way of listening as openly as possible, as deeply as possible, as fully, with all of our being, as possible. And that's how we become more fully human ourselves, by that capacity, to listen in this manner.

Betty: What I love about this, Anton, is what you just said. This is so humanistic. It really almost is the definition of humanistic, putting the human at the center. And what's amazing about it is, I have my own assumptions about dialogue, but particularly what you just said, that entering into a radically open dialogue with somebody has the goal of loss to it. I think that that's incredible that in a certain sense, you gain by losing and by doing so, you might, I wonder what you think of that, and Jonathan, I think you're gonna get a psychoanalytic training out of this before this session is done.

Jonathan: Oh, but wait, because I'm going to bring it to politics, I promise you.

Betty: We are still Mind of State here, but we're deep in the mind here. But to go back to this issue of losing to gain and this human at the center and this turning to the face of the other and really taking them into our care. Are we creating something new through radical openness?

Anton: The hope is that something new will be created or will emerge. Yes. But the tricky part is, this is one of those paradoxes that often characterizes psychoanalytic thought, you can't go into it saying I'm going to lose something in order to gain something. I'm going to lose my preconceptions and my foreknowledge and I'm gonna be open in order to gain something out of this contact and out of this conversation, because as soon as you start to think about your gaining something, then there's a way in which you start to depart from the kind of openness to which we aspire. So, you know, between you and me on the side, I'll say, yeah, there's probably a gain there that might be around the corner. But you go into it, not with your eye on the gain, but with your eye on the loss. Like, what can I relinquish? What can I give up in order to take the other person in? And then how do the two of us become something new together, like the merging of our dialogic horizons, as Gadamer put it, like, how does that happen? But we can't say in advance that it's going to happen, that it's guaranteed. We have to aspire to it, aspire to losing what we thought we knew. And then something might start to form and it might be good, but we don't know what it's going to be in advance.

Jonathan: So it's sort of like there's, you know, we say that an altruistic act also has a threat of selfishness in it, right, because it feels good to do something altruistic. But we don't go in with a selfish intent. We go in altruistically and the byproduct might end up making us feel good, but the altruism is what comes first. I do want to make this shift to politics and out of the therapy room for a second, because I think there's a great application of

what you're talking about to the nonclinical world. And when I first heard the notion of radical openness, it actually brought to my mind a notion that we talk about in politics and even in corporate communications, which is radical transparency. And radical transparency is the notion of a leader cutting through the pablum, the jargon, being human, but being human in their expression, rooting themselves in empathy, being straight with their audience, respecting them enough to be honest, even if it involves admitting errors or shortcomings or demonstrating some sort of weakness. It's the weakness that's actually a strength, rather than hiding behind the bluster. And I think when you get a radical openness of listening with a radical transparency of being forthcoming, then we're starting to get into a flow that I think could be applicable to the political and community conversations that we need to hear, particularly around very divisive issues that are creating a lot of conflict in society right now.

Betty: And what prompts radical transparency, Jonathan? When do you guys turn toward it or how did it come about in strategic communications or political communications?

Jonathan: You know, generally we counsel our clients, whether it's a candidate or an elected official or a corporate executive, to be radically transparent when it's clear that there's doubt or skepticism in the audience and they're sensing, they can feel it when there's inauthentic communication, when there is stonewalling, when there's legalese or jargon that that people are hiding behind, right. And you say put that aside, put the talking points aside, and talk like real people, right. When you see that something's not working and that you're at risk of your mission going awry, that's when—

Betty: So when people stop listening in a certain sense.

Jonathan: That's right.

Betty: When they start to feel like you're not being true and your words are not being authentic—

Jonathan: That's right.

Betty: —and they're turning away from you. They're turning their faces away from your face.

Jonathan: That's exactly right.

Betty: That's interesting.

Jonathan: And we see it all the time. You know, we see it when the politician is caught in a hot mic incident or in some sort of, you know, illicit or inappropriate relationship. And they need to come clean, right. It's like they have a moment when they either come forward, demonstrate that they have humility, that they are going to speak with candor, that they're going to learn from the experience and that they're going to level with the public or forever lose that trust.

Betty: And so, Anton, what do you think about radical transparency versus radical openness since you're the expert on radical openness for us?

Anton: So here's the interesting thing that radical transparency makes me think of, Jonathan and Betty. There's a way in which there is quite a parallel between radical openness and radical transparency, as you're describing it. However, I'm concerned about the notion of transparency. The word, for me,

implies a kind of elimination of the human element, like the human desire to hide or the human imperfection. I'm not going to be, like, mysterious in the various ways that I might be. I'm gonna be transparent, like as if the ideal then becomes transcending one's own humanness. I know that that's not all that radical transparency implies, as you've described it. But the use of the word transparency concerns me because transparency is the language of the combination of secret keeping on the one hand and secret divulging on the other. And there's something that already takes us down the path of not being in good faith—

Jonathan: Yes.

Anton: —from the very beginning.

Jonathan: Yes. Well, when there's so much distrust, it's almost a way of saying, look, I'm actually not going to translate this at all. I'm not going to filter it. I'm just going to open up the book and let you see the records for yourself, right. You be the judge. I will not be filter.

Anton: Yeah, right.

Betty: And here's the thing, radical openness may depend on a private conversation, a truly confidential conversation as it is between a patient and an analyst or a therapist and a client. What Jonathan is talking about with radical transparency is a public openness.

Anton: Yeah.

Betty: And you got a politician or a public figure and there is this sort of closed or private thing. And maybe it's a scandal. Maybe it's a hidden record of taxes not paid, so to speak. Not that I'm thinking of anybody in particular.

Jonathan: No, no.

Betty: And there almost is an assumption on the part of a public figure that they're hiding something sometimes. And so as you're putting it, there is a challenge to transparency. But can we flex? Is it possible to flex radical openness, I'm making a leap here, into the public sphere?

Anton: You know, my hope is that our politicians would be open. But I don't start with their openness about their own bank accounts or taxes paid or holdings in foreign governments or countries. I instead am focused on their openness to the other person—

Jonathan: Yeah.

Anton: —the other people that people that they're elected to govern.

Jonathan: The empathy.

Anton: Yeah, the empathy and, but, Jonathan, I want to take it further than empathy, because it's not just, like, the Clintonian "I feel your pain." It's the openness to the idea that you could be hearing something that sounds very foreign, you could think very differently about, but you could be receptive to anyway and see what it does to you as you sit with it rather than try to respond to it right away. That's one of the crucial aspects here is that in the therapeutic situation and outside the therapeutic situation, this could be a

constant, that we try to listen in such a way that we sit with what we hear for a while. We take it in. We take it into our care. And we let it affect us. Perhaps to move us is the language that I prefer. And we may be moved in such a way that our perspective changes, that we may let go of ideas and thoughts and ways of organizing the world that we had previously clung to with all our might. That's the kind of openness that I'd like to see from politicians, which has nothing to do with them coming clean about who they're having sex with or where their money is going.

Jonathan: Right, so empathy suggests that you can relate to someone else's pain or circumstance, but openness doesn't necessarily suggest that you would relate in your life experience, but that you're open to being moved by their experience, even if it's radically different than yours and that you grow from your knowledge of their experience. You grow from your sharing a moment with someone and getting insight into their experience, right?

Anton: That's right. You grow from your receptivity to their experience, I would prefer to say, rather than your knowledge of their experience.

Betty: Anton, this prompts me to think about a burning question that I have about polarities and polarization in our country's dialogue right now. But first, let's take a pause to hear from our friends at Democracy Works.

[AUDIO]

Jenna Spinelle: Hey Mind of State listeners. My name is Jenna Spinelle and I host and produce a podcast called Democracy Works. Our show examines what it means to live in a democracy, everything from big picture issues like neoliberalism and demagoguery to on the ground reforms like ranked choice

voting and open primaries. Some of our episodes include Jonathan Haidt on the psychology of democracy, Andrew Sullivan on the case for institutions, and Sabeel Rahman on making democracy more equitable and inclusive. Underlying it all is the notion that democracy is hard work and takes effort from all of us to build something that's greater than the sum of its parts. New episodes of Democracy Works are released every Monday and you can find them wherever you listen to podcasts.

Betty: Now that we're back, here comes my burning question, Anton, if I can recall it.

Anton: All right, I've been sitting on the edge of my seat since the break.

Betty: It's this cliffhanger. We talk about, you're talking about radical openness and you don't make an assumption about the other. We're in a place where people are making all sorts of assumptions about all sorts of people without even, you know, making inquiry. There are a lot of silos on the Internet and social media. There are a lot of silos in the media itself. The left and the right are not radically open to each other. So is there a way in which we can sort of start to prepare people to, or convince people that this, because this seems like a great, I mean, maybe because I'm also a psychoanalyst, but this seems fantastic. Like, it really seems what we need in society today to have a democratic conversation.

Jonathan: Right. How do we condition people for dialogue, right?

Anton: Yeah, yeah. But see, Jonathan, your instinct to do something to people to get them to be better goes against radical openness in a certain sense, like you want to condition them. And like, I don't know if that'll work. Here's the

problem. We want people to be curious about each other. Curiosity is so crucial. But we know as psychoanalysts that curiosity is precarious, that from the beginning of life, babies are born curious. They come into the world, they reach out, they touch things, they taste things, they look at things. All their senses are alive and they're curious about everything. Unfortunately, the process of growing up involves a curtailment of a lot of human curiosity over time. It's as if it's too dangerous to remain curious, at least as curious as we were when we were babies.

Jonathan: Right, right.

Anton: So we have to learn to avert our eyes. We have to learn to narrow our curiosity down and be able to have normal conversations. Normal is in quotes like hi, how are you? I'm fine. How are you? I'm fine. Good to see you. Bye. Like, that's an uncurious conversation, but we socially are conditioned to do that, to use that word, Jonathan, as a way of getting through life and feeling relatively self-contained and as if things can continue as we expect them to. Curiosity represents a threat in this regard. It's not just this nice thing like, oh, I'm curious. Oh, you are? Great. Let's explore your curiosity. Curiosity threatens to take us into territory that is unfamiliar and that may mess up the way we've organized our understanding of ourselves and of the world. So, that's the challenge in radical openness is that we're actually trying to enter conversations, being very, very curious about each other, as curious as babies are about the world. And that's arguably a dangerous thing to do. And that's what makes it hard to tell people, hey be more open. Be more open to each other. Relinquish your preconceptions. Let go of the things you thought you knew and enter into the conversation as if you don't know all the things you thought you knew. People—

Jonathan: Right. Sort of, you know, it's like, hey come on into the arena, but leave your armor outside.

Anton: Exactly. Your armor.

Jonathan: Right. This is the conundrum, right? We want people to enter into a more open dialogue, but we understand the fears. We understand the risks in doing so and going in open, unprotected. So how do we engage in unscripted dialogue and in open listening and taking people in when language can be loaded, when we are conditioned to protect ourselves and to avert risk? How do we go there?

Anton: Yeah, its—

Betty: And I'll add onto what Jonathan says, Anton. Right now we're in a position of great instability. In this current moment, we're in a pandemic, we're facing climate change, we're facing a referendum on racial injustice, we're facing economic crises. There's a lot to be safe about. And yet maybe it's a position of opportunity because it's like, what do you have to lose, but to be open? Like it's true. This goes against an evolutionary impulse to protect oneself.

Anton: Yeah, well, I don't know if the impulse is evolutionary, but I think that it is really part of the challenge of being a human being in relation to other human beings. Babies learn that they can't be too curious about things or they might make their parents anxious. And so the baby has to learn to manage their anxiety so as not to drive their parents crazy. So the challenge is how can we help people enter into open dialogues? How can we get people to practice radical openness, perhaps not just in the psychoanalytic

psychotherapeutic context, but in life? Now, one thing that experience seems to show, because I do consulting about issues of diversity, workshops, and things like that. And one of the things that seems to be the case is if you get people talking to each other, something good happens. You get people talking to each other with fairly banal questions. Like questions like when were you first aware of your race or when were you first aware of your gender? Just simple questions like that. People start to talk with each other and feel things that they don't usually allow themselves to feel. Of course, there's always the risk of things getting polarized and people feeling hurt or rejected in such conversations. But those risks can't be avoided. They can't be escaped. Having these kinds of conversations involves risk. It's risk worth taking, I would argue, but we can't take risk out, like, one of the things that drives me crazy these days is the notion of a safe space, like, this is a safe space. We're going to have a conversation in a safe space. And my feeling about that notion of safe space is nonsense. No space can be proclaimed safe. You can only find your way to that through the process of trying to be open to each other and having a good faith effort to have a conversation, to have a dialogue with each other.

Jonathan: I wonder, does radical openness then does it work in all settings? Should we consider radical openness equally applicable in work, in school, in community settings? Or are there places where we shouldn't be as open?

Anton: Yeah, that's a great question. I think that it really does require a kind of protected setting where we're coming to talk to each other in good faith and where we have the, we can agree on the aspiration toward openness. A lot of that has to do with who our leaders are and how our leaders are acting, quite frankly. If you have leadership all the way to the top and the leadership says, I don't listen to other people, I know, I already know, you don't need to tell me

because I already know, then that's frankly the opposite of radical openness. That's radical ignorance—

Betty: A breakdown.

Anton: If I may.

Betty: You may.

Anton: Whereas if a leader says, huh, I don't know everything, I'm willing to listen just as much as I'm willing to talk. And in my listening, perhaps to be influenced and affected and to have my perspective changed, then that's an example that is likely to make its way into ordinary conversations that are not just in the psychotherapeutic context. Jonathan, the place where things can't really work well when it comes to radical openness, where it doesn't apply, is something like, where people are debating each other, like debate is very different from the kind of conversation that we're hoping to have.

Jonathan: Right.

Anton: Another context where it doesn't work is where people are lying. Quite frankly, lying interferes, like, breaks down this process totally.

Jonathan: I would imagine.

Anton: Because that's an attempt to manipulate the other person, to mislead them, and send them off in a direction that had nothing to do with the truth or with you, and in that case being radically open to a lie is not going to lead to the kinds of change that we're talking about.

Jonathan: The trust has to be on both sides of the fulcrum, obviously, you referenced if the leaders are not open, right, then it's going to signal something that's going to break down the openness. But these days, I wonder if there's not also a responsibility by those who are being led, because it seems that in some organizations or in some settings, whether it's employees or it's constituents or it's those of us marching and protesting in the streets, but we're coming in loaded for bear, right? We're called the P.C. police or we're ready to call out people if they make an error, particularly our leaders, right. So we're looking for an error. We're looking for a lie. And that, too, can shut down a process, can't it?

Anton: Absolutely. Absolutely. You know, I prefer, like, that term, calling out, calling people out, I strongly prefer a notion of calling people in, like, when there's a problem, call them in to dialogue. We've got a problem. What you're saying is hitting me in this way and I'm seeing it differently or it's hurting me in this way or it's even making me angry. Can we talk about this? Like, that's an attempt at conversation rather than the notion of calling people out, which is shame based. I think. I'm going to shame you for what you're saying.

Betty: Yeah. And Anton, you bringing up shame really makes me think, because what you were saying about the trust, you and Jonathan, calls to mind what our last guest, Robert Jay Lifton, was talking about as the breakdown of communication between the Democrats and the Republicans, whereas before for, he's a historian and a psychiatrist so he's been studying authoritarianism for 70 years, but he sees the democratic process as being built on a loyal opposition, meaning that you have respect for your other side. You do not demonize them. You do not think of them as an enemy. You're both in this together. And that is two sides of a debate, which is not radical openness, but it causes me to think about the trust, which is a container for a

lack of shame. And I think that that's what's lacking right now. And so how do you create a situation of calling people in? Because they're going to need to know they're not going to be shamed. And I think in these conversations, particularly around race and diversity and prejudice, there's a lot of shame in the subject. It creates a lot of anxiety and threat and people assume they're going to do the wrong thing.

Anton: Yep.

Betty: So how do you use this radical openness, which I think it's really, there's something very, very potent and key in it, to call people in in good faith, that they're not going to be shamed around a really difficult subject.

Anton: Yeah, you know, Betty, it's such a challenge because when people have traumas in their lives that make them sensitive to shame, which virtually every human being does, then it's almost impossible to convey to that person that they're not going to be shamed. They can even hear it in your telling them, you know what, I'm not going to shame you. Oh, well why are you telling me that? You think I'm sensitive to shame. I'm not, you know, I don't care about that.

Betty: Right. That sounds like a callout.

Anton: There's a kind of malignancy, to the sensitivity to shame and a shame based orientation, which is very hard to overcome. The best we can do, I think, rather than saying I'm not going to shame you, is to conduct ourselves in ways that convey openness, convey willingness to listen thoughtfully and as openly as possible without giving in to our own human internal reflexes to

rebut or to counterargue or to, frankly, shame the other person, especially when we hear things that we just can't stand to hear.

Jonathan: Do you think that we're in a period where language is so charged at the moment, emotions are running so high, are there sometimes that are more suitable to openness than others, I guess, is what I'm getting at?

Anton: Yeah, the more anxious people get, the more polarized they get, the harder dialogue becomes. There's definitely, that's a fact of life. We need to cool things down. We need to de-escalate the ways in which people in the United States are at each other's throats. And you're absolutely right that dialogue can sometimes be impossible or at least feel that way. The challenge that we have is when dialogue feels impossible, can we find some small way of restarting the conversation? That's what I believe is a good starting point. We can't avoid those breakdowns of communication where we're not listening to each other and we're not speaking to each other. We can't prevent that from ever happening. But what we can do is see the breakdowns of communication as opportunities. Inevitably, they're going to come. But what do we do when the conversation breaks down? How can we find a way to start talking again even if the conversation that we're restarting is going to be awkward and bring up bad feelings again, how can we get it going again? Because that, frankly, is our only way of getting through this together. If we're going to be human beings residing on this earth, we're gonna have to figure it out together. And so we're gonna have to restart conversations that break down.

Betty: What you're saying reminds me of what you said early in the episode about care, that you enter into it because you care and would it be to transmit that we care to listen or to engage and not to attack and not to shame and

not to hurt. And that perhaps that we each hurt, because I think we all do, and that we would want other people to see that we need care as well. So that there's an accountability on all sides to using this communication, not just to mediate a peace, but to advance taking care of each other.

Anton: So, yeah, caring is crucial. Finding ways to care about each other. But there are no guarantees that we're going to be able to behave in caring ways all the time, because sometimes we won't be conscious of the ways in which we're treating another person that aren't so caring. So what we're called upon to do is to listen with radical openness so that we can hear the ways in which what we're doing is not caring, might be hurting the other person. That's our ticket to getting back on track with dialogue. I'm trying my best to participate in this conversation. I'm trying not to attack or hurt you. But you know what? I might wind up unconsciously attacking you or you might notice an attack that I didn't even think of. And when you do, let me take that thought very seriously rather than telling you no that's not what I was doing. No I didn't mean that. No that's not what I said. You're twisting my words. Better, from a radical openness standpoint, to say, oh all right. I'm thinking about that. I'm sitting with that.

Jonathan: How explicit are you suggesting we be? Is this a, do you name the phenomenon as it's happening? Do you say am I saying something that's offending you? I think I'm saying something that's causing you concern. Or is it an internal voice?

Anton: Yeah, I think we all can have our different styles. And a lot of this is internal. A lot of it is based not on what you actually say, but on how you're processing the moment. And people can sense when you're listening in a receptive way versus not. But of course, having said that, I'll say, of course, it

can be useful to say, wait how is that sinking in? How is that hitting you, what I'm saying? How is that coming across? Is there a problem with it or I see some distress on your face with what I said. Tell me about that. When we express interest like that, then maybe we'll hear something interesting that can have an impact on us, can have, dare I say, a therapeutic impact on us that can enhance our growth to make us a better participant in the dialogue.

Betty: I mean, Anton, what you're saying is something that I've refracted back to my patients who come from all sorts of identities and socio-economic backgrounds and ages and ethnicities, immigration statuses. But one thing that does unify them is the wish to see and be seen. And what you're saying in this is when we reflect that we are seeing the other, we show them that they are in us, that we are reflecting them and we care, again here's that word care, and I'm thinking, you know, as we go through, shortly, the election, we all hope, at least on this podcast, that it will go a certain way. But things will not–

Jonathan: Yes indeed.

Anton: We hope that the most open person will win.

Betty: Yes. Let's. May the most open person win. That's perfect. But there will be a lot of work to be done and a lot of conversations have been collapsed. Like I was saying before, a lot of opinions have become siloed. And so can we start to see these ways to be radically open beyond this moment of where a leader is very, very closed and telling us that he knows everything and modeling an opposite view, a radical ignorance?

Anton: Yeah. Imagine if, like, the debates are over now, the presidential debates, but imagine if they were the debates weren't debates. They were presidential conversations where the candidates had to sit in a room and talk to each other. And we would be listening to how they do that and how able they were to listen to each other just as much as how articulate they could be about their points. Imagine if that was prioritized. That would be a much more interesting thing to watch than what we've seen, I daresay.

Jonathan: Anton, I think we're gonna have to get you onto the presidential debate commission.

Betty: On that note, may the best man win. May the most open leader win.

Jonathan: Or shall we say the most, Joe-pen.

Betty: Oh my god, that's really—

Jonathan: Sorry.

Betty: Jonathan. Thank you so much, Anton, for coming on and giving us your time.

Anton: It's been my pleasure. Thank you, Betty and thank you, Jonathan.

Betty: Thanks for joining us on this episode of Mind of State. If you like this episode, you'll find plenty more on Apple Podcasts or anywhere else you get your podcasts.

Jonathan: You can also find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram at Mind of State Pod. Our website is MindofState.com.

<**Betty:** Mind of State is produced by Alletta Cooper and Jenny Woodward.
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