

Private Conflicts in Public Times

By John D. Mayer

OUR PUBLIC SPHERE of life and our private, personal minds often follow parallel paths — more so than is sometimes acknowledged. Successful leaders understand and address peoples' private needs and conflicts before some of us may even be able to recognize them.

In turn, private individuals are responsive to public actions because those actions influence our lives. For these reasons, even a small political decision, such as the entertainment industry's postponement of the Emmys, will influence and illuminate the more private, personal sphere.

Since Sept. 11 and its sequelae, many of us are wondering when it will be all right to proceed with our lives, to socialize, to take up business again. As a psychologist whose research focuses on personality, I think it is sometimes helpful to



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imagine ourselves in the position of an executive whose task it is to develop and manage our own mind. We wonder whether it is all right to enjoy some private frivolous thoughts under these circumstances. This is the private branch of the more public discussion concerning whether the entertainment industry should proceed with its business.

The private executive in our mind has to deal with several new issues since the events of Sept. 11. We have shifted from a relatively comfortable sense of how we act and behave to a new and challenging terrain that combines shock and grief, a new perception of the world, and a desire to maintain our old way of life.

Shock is one common reaction to the events of Sept. 11. Our emotions seem seized up — inadequate to fully signal and respond to what has happened. Matters are too horrid to let in, and as a consequence, one observes them without feeling. As this self-protective reaction lifts, it gives way both to grief and sadness, and to fear and anger. Some of us grieve loved ones who perished in the terrorist attack and its aftermath, and others prepare to grieve those who will be placed, ultimately, on the list of victims. We have lost our sense of unquestioned security. Although we knew in the

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abstract that something like this could happen, "could happen" is a pale reflection of "has happened." A near-miss on the road pales in comparison to an actual car collision.

Along with our emotional understanding, we must grasp what happened intellectually. New facts must be learned and mastered: who among us died or lost a loved one, what sorts of terrorist threats we are vulnerable to and how we can prepare for them, and what is happening in the war. Even as some of us mourn those who have died, others of us are watching our children, now in the military, sent overseas.

This has all happened so quickly and decisively that many parts of our lives from before these events persist almost unchanged. Many of those whose lives are most disrupted carry on with what they need to do. Hopes, jokes and desires are still there for many of us, and sometimes even intensified.

This desire to persist is sometimes shameful — as

when we realize we told a joke too soon, expressed a hope to someone who can't share it, or realize we seem irritable in the face of stress. The persistence is also priceless, however, in the sense that it helps us find and maintain our routine, and even our balance, in the midst of the turmoil.

Again, the outer and inner worlds mirror each other. Asking whether the cancellation of the Emmys was right, as some have done, helps address our own more private search for what is right to feel, think and do. Showing the Emmys with its frivolity live on the night when we began bombing Afghanistan would have created a surreal, tragic juxtaposition. Inside ourselves, similar surreal juxtapositions may arise as pre-attack attitudes and desires intertwine with post-attack feelings and thoughts.

For many of us, the old and new will merge gracefully over time; for others this may be a longer, more challenging struggle. Either way, there is a richness to be experienced and a puzzle to unlock, in the parallels between our deeply felt personal reactions and how they play out in the public sphere.