

Poli & Humanities ep 6

[00:00:00.00] TOM MERRILL: Hello, everybody. Welcome to Politics and the Humanities. This is a podcast from American University. We care about books. We care about the humanities. We care about politics. And we care about ideas. I'm here with my colleague, Sarah Marsh. Sarah, why don't you say hello.

[00:00:14.79] SARAH MARSH: Hey, folks. Thanks for joining us.

[00:00:17.24] TOM MERRILL: I am Tom Merrill. I'm a faculty member in the Department of Government. We're joined today by my colleague and dear friend Borden Flanagan, who is also a faculty member in the Department of Government. He's also a mainstay of the Political Theory Institute, which is run by our colleague Alan Levine-- which, all of you should go out and check out our website online.

[00:00:39.78] I think I can say that Borden is a much-beloved teacher to many people who come through AU. And so we're just really happy to have him with us today. Borden is a scholar of Thucydides. He has been studying and teaching Thucydides-- I was going to say for a long time. But that's maybe not the right way to say it. He's an expert. How about we just say that?

[00:01:04.98] And he's here today to talk to us about Thucydides' discussion of the plague, which is one of the memorable incidents in Thucydides' book, History of the Peloponnesian War. And I guess we should just say, to begin, why we're doing this. Why are we doing this, Sarah?

[00:01:26.36] SARAH MARSH: So we thought it would be instructive to think about a narrative of a plague from history because we're living through one now. And one of the things that the humanities allow us to do is reflect on human circumstances other than our own. And in this sense, Thucydides offers some perspective on what we're living through now. And Borden's going to help us understand that kind of perspective.

[00:01:55.64] TOM MERRILL: Right, yeah. And I think we're especially interested in how does this help us to think in the way that liberal education asks us to think about the whole human experience. Nothing human is alien to me, including some pretty gross things that happened in the plague. Borden, you're an expert on this?

[00:02:12.75] BORDEN FLANAGAN: I'm an expert on gross things. I'm also an expert on the plague, yeah. I mean, I'm not-- I don't have a background in medical history. I'm not an expert on plagues. But it's one of two places in the book where Thucydides interjects himself. So Thucydides is a very reticent writer. Everybody who reads Thucydides comes away impressed by how careful a writer he is and how profound this account is.

[00:02:44.67] But it's not profound because he says, I, Thucydides, think x,y, or z. He lets you-- he really makes the reader an audience to the events of the war. And he frames those events so carefully that you can't help but think about some very deep issues. And it's hard not to see the way this plague hits Athens, and the way that it disrupts their private and their public lives so

thoroughly, and not really be faced with some salient questions. Questions that are salient at all times and places.

[00:03:21.12] Given the raging mortality, it raises the question of what war deaths mean, what war lives mean, as individuals and as a community. And one of the ways in which I think this is salient for us now is that it's conspicuous in the plague that the Athenians relationship to time is altered. Everybody in the city thinks they're going to die in a matter of days. And so society collapsed as a result.

[00:03:48.91] And so the time frame issues is rightly placed in a permanent way. And I think that's relevant to how we've been affected by COVID ourselves. We're all kind of sitting around in lockdown wondering what to do. And so we've been disconnected from our normal understanding of how things happen and how our time this is going to play out.

[00:04:20.45] So it's a profound piece. It's one of two places in the whole history where Thucydides kind of makes himself prominent. He comes in and he adheres to the importance of the events he's about to relay in exposing something with permanence-- or something that's going to recur, I should say. He says, I'm going to record these events of the plague so that people will recognize it in future. And so just the fact that he kind of steps out from behind the curtain and shows himself lends important speech. He rarely does that. And so when he does, we know that it's a particularly philosophically important scene.

[00:05:07.36] TOM MERRILL: So Borden, you went pretty deep pretty quickly. And I have to say, and perhaps some of our viewers or listeners might say, you darned political theorists, you're always trying to get me to ask, what's the meaning of my life. And after a while I just get a headache. Can we back up? I want to talk about all the things that you just said. But can we back up and just tell the story? And in re-reading this-- so I did, in preparation. I don't fly blind, Borden. I did prepare for this. I went back and was reading the context.

[00:05:41.47] The plague comes right after another part of Thucydides that's even more famous, correct?

[00:05:46.56] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Right. So do you want to go through the funeral oration and the plague?

[00:05:54.20] TOM MERRILL: Yeah. Can we just-- it seems that the plague is clearly a kind of commentary on the funeral oration. Perhaps even Thucydides is subtweeting the funeral oration, or offering silent commentary on it. Can you just tell us-- remind us-- what's going on with the funeral oration? And then remind us what happens with the plague.

[00:06:13.22] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Absolutely. In the first year of the war between Athens and Sparta, which is a cataclysmic war-- it takes 27 years, this war-- and it develops from seemingly unimportant events into this gigantic catastrophe for Greece. But at this point, we're only a year in and not very many people have fallen.

[00:06:41.49] But every year there's a war, the city holds a funeral oration, where they hold a collective funeral for everyone who's died in the war at that time. And somebody prominent gives a speech. And Pericles is the leader of Athens, without question the most powerful and most prominent and most respected statesman in Athens at this time. And so he gives a speech over the ashes of the fallen.

[00:07:17.66] And this is kind of a remarkable setting. The speech-- and all such speeches-- are not just about praising those who have fallen and justifying their sacrifice, but also justifying the same sacrifice from the living. Pericles needs to persuade the Athenians that they need to keep fighting. And so he has to reconcile people to the possibility of them giving their lives for the community.

[00:07:54.68] And, by the way, this is maybe the front door problem to political theory. How do you reconcile the individual good to the common good? How do you justify people giving something up? Not just giving up something small like taxes, or big like taxes, but something major, some sacrifice to the common good. And in the context of war, you're giving up everything. You're giving up your lives.

[00:08:25.51] So he has to do this. The traditional way, by the way, the people who did this, is by making speeches about protecting the family, protecting the gods of the city, protecting the homeland. All these traditional ways subordinates the individual to the community. And they're appeals to sentiment. And Sparta is maybe the most famous example of the subordination of the individual to the common. Where if you're a Spartan, in a very important sense you're not an individual. You're a brick in the larger structure that is the regimes and laws of Sparta.

[00:09:09.85] Pericles, in this speech, he tries to unite the individual and the common good. And he argues that both are satisfied by devotion to the city. And the way he does this is kind of remarkable. Most of the speech is a speech about virtue, and eudaemonistic virtue. So "eudaimonia" is this Greek word for flourishing. Its virtue as a kind of excellence.

[00:09:45.94] And so what he argues is that devotion to the city brings out the best in the individual. And participation in the civic project constitutes flourishing. Now Athens-- the civic project of Athens is empire. It's got a vast naval empire. And a lot of what that civic project involves is putting down people-- putting down cities-- that are trying to revolt from the empire. So it's a very war-like understanding of flourishing.

[00:10:20.70] The problem, of course, with an account of citizenship that offers flourishing is that dying puts a hamper on flourishing. So the second part of his pitch is glory. Devoting yourself to Athens means fighting for Athens. And fighting for Athens leads to your death. That death offers you immortality. And so one of the most remarkable parts of the speech is the way that he says that, die for Athens and you will be immortalized. Everyone will remember you forever.

[00:11:00.48] So you've got two things that are, I think, in our context, especially striking. The politics in Pericles' account-- and it's really kind of a founding, is what he's doing. He's giving an

account of what it means for Athens to be Athens. And what does it mean to be an Athenian. What does your life mean as an Athenian?

[00:11:25.45] And in Pericles' account, it's not about the economy. It's not about security. It's about-- first, it's about the fullest flourishing as a human being. And then it's about overcoming death somehow. Politics is about transcendence, transcending your mortal limits.

[00:11:46.78] Now the plague utterly destroys both projects. But before that--

[00:11:53.59] TOM MERRILL: Wait for a second. Sarah, do we want to ask any questions about the funeral oration?

[00:11:58.27] SARAH MARSH: I do, yes. The question about the funeral oration, Borden, from my perspective, is does the empire have a relationship to the Athenians understanding of the plague? So is there the sense that the plague has come to Athens because of the imperial project? Or is that not a connection that would have been available to Pericles or to Thucydides?

[00:12:28.84] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Oh, yeah. So one thing that happens after the plague is that the Athenians-- during the plague, the Athenians are-- and one of the things that's really interesting that I want to get into is that the Athenians stop propitiating the gods. They stop obeying the religious laws and the religious ceremonies because they see that the pious and the impious die at the same rate. But they continue to believe in a religious interpretation of the plague. They think that the plague is a divine punishment.

[00:13:04.91] And after the speech, they're kind of looking around for something to blame. And they blame Pericles. Not for the empire. They don't think it's a punishment for the empire. They think it's a punishment for Pericles' obdurate response to Spartan demands. There have been some quarrels between Athens and Sparta leading up to the war. And Pericles has taken a hard stand against any kind of concessions to the Spartans.

[00:13:37.39] And although there's a treaty between Athens and Sparta before the war, the Athenians take some actions that puts a real strain on that treaty. But they stay within the letter of the law. But nevertheless, the Spartans respond with war. And so the Athenians come to blame Pericles as the cause of the war, and, therefore, the cause of divine sanction in the form of the plague.

[00:14:04.21] So they're not drawn so far as believing that their empire is unjust. But they do think that Pericles' particularly aggressive defense of the empire caused the war. And so they think, aha, that's what did it. The thing is, he's still such a brilliant speaker and he's so clearly head and shoulders above everybody else, in terms of understanding what to do, explaining it well, and being patriotic.

[00:14:34.15] But they don't get rid of them. They just fine him. So they kick him out of office briefly then they bring him back in. And they make him pay a fine. And that kind of satisfies their anger. But in terms of imperial self-understanding, not everyone-- it's clear in the very last

speech that we have in Thucydides and Pericles, there are people that are critical of war and the empire. But they can be dismissed out of hand. Most of the Athenians are on board-- go empire.

[00:15:15.49] TOM MERRILL: So Borden, I thought you were going to say to Sarah's-- because Sarah's question could be interpreted in a moral way. Or is this a punishment for the empire? But isn't the obvious answer, yeah, of course it's connected with the empire because it's like globalization. You're having commerce and sending ships all over the world.

[00:15:32.34] He says that it comes from Egypt. And it comes through the port. So this is what happens when you go out and have relations with many different people. You get diseases. I mean, that's sort of like the pedestrian-- I mean, apart from all the highfalutin' stuff.

[00:15:50.46] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Oh, yeah, yeah. No, I'm sorry. It's not clear to what extent the Athenians-- I mean, at first, they worry that the Spartans have poisoned their cisterns. But there's not a lot in Thucydides that suggests that they understood that it was commerce that brought them in. But yeah, you've got this far-flung empire. And it comes in via the trade routes.

[00:16:12.81] TOM MERRILL: Right, if only Pericles had-- this is what Trump, his big point, that he's happy about himself, is that he blocked the ports from China. Which seems, I guess, absurd and way overblown. But isn't that the underlying practical issue?

[00:16:32.27] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, no, Thucydides, I think, puts you in a position to see, OK, this is where it's happening. Because it comes from Ethiopia and it comes from across the Mediterranean. And it doesn't really happen in the Peloponnese. You've got these farmers in the Peloponnese that don't have a lot of commerce with the people outside the Peloponnese. They're pretty safe. So yeah, it's clear that Thucydides understands the vectors of contagion. But whether the Athenians do, it's not so clear.

[00:17:06.89] TOM MERRILL: And can I ask about the-- just before we leave the talk about the funeral oration, because you spent a lot of time talking about the glory part as a kind of recompense for people who are going to die for the city. Even though there's nobody named in this narrative who's died for the city yet. But there's something that, sort of like a theoretical-- almost a theoretical exercise.

[00:17:28.48] But the funny thing to me in rereading the funeral oration, he spends much more time talking about, well, this is good because it forces us-- it's like the greatest competition. He's like the ultimate meritocrat, that you get to show off your virtue. And the core claim is really that we Athenians deserve to rule the world. It's not like a bashful we're improving things. But that we're just superior.

[00:18:03.30] BORDEN FLANAGAN: So I was going to talk about his claims in the funeral oration. He makes a claim about the regime, the democracy, that it's a meritocracy. And it's very interesting there. I mean, he's not an egalitarian. The reason he likes a democracy is that it suppresses class advantages for the sake of natural advantages. He thinks that democracy brings out natural inequality, the best rise to the top. Which of course, is nice to say if you're Pericles and you're at the top.

[00:18:27.62] TOM MERRILL: Well, that's what we say in America today, right?

[00:18:30.22] BORDEN FLANAGAN: That's right, yeah. Clearly, the best rise to the top in the American meritocracy. Everybody believes that.

[00:18:38.76] TOM MERRILL: Air quote around that, for listeners to--

[00:18:41.26] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah. So Pericles also makes the same claim about the empire. He says that nobody complains about being conquered by us. They all know that we're the best.

[00:18:57.15] TOM MERRILL: It's like losing to Michael Jordan. It was an honor to play.

[00:19:00.75] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Right, right. Yeah, which is kind of, I mean, it's just an amazing statement. Thucydides makes clear, there's plenty of complaining, actually, that goes on. So Pericles makes this claim that the regime is meritocratic, but also the empire is meritocratic. And this is both stage and spur to Athenian virtue. But because your virtue can be enacted on this world stage and be rewarded in the grandest possible way, the whole project, domestic and foreign, is a meritocracy that reveals virtue and brings it out.

[00:19:42.99] And the three virtues that he highlights-- he says Athens is the school of Hellas. Everybody can learn from us. It's a universal model that he puts forward. And so he puts forward three virtues. And also he emphasizes that these virtues are natural. Those Spartans, they just have virtue beaten into them, and so it's purely conventional. And it doesn't really show a real human flourishing. But here in Athens, we get real human flourishing according to human nature, where the best in human nature is brought out by the democracy and by the empire.

[00:20:16.53] And there are three virtues, which we'll run through quickly. One is kind of easy courage, easy mind and eagerness for battle, but involves a total overcoming of the fear of death. He calls it rathumia, which is a word in Greek for a kind of lightheartedness. It means easy-flowing. And he says we gladly conquer people defending their homes. I mean, it's amazing. He really sets it into the imperial context. It's not airy. It's not we're defending our homes. It's, we gladly rush into battle and defeat people defending their homes. So it's explicitly imperial.

[00:20:58.74] The second is daring combined with the deliberation, that we alone charge into dangerous situations really fully knowing the extent of the risk. And we deliberate in this kind of daring way that we face the harsh truths that we need to face to do this. So there's a way that daring is implicit in the liberation because you need to be daring to face the tough things. You need to face it deliberately. But also deliberation is implicit in daring, because if you're really daring, then you're not anesthetized by ignorance. You're really facing the scariness of the situation. So that's the second.

[00:21:43.77] And then the third-- and the summary one-- is this Greek word autarkes, which means self-sufficiency. So be equal to every challenge. The Athenians are kind of this poise at the center of the storm of imperial war. All these things are happening and the Athenians have this perfect total mastery of themselves and of contingency.

[00:22:15.38] TOM MERRILL: Is Pericles a change-maker for a changing world?

[00:22:21.12] [LAUGHTER]

[00:22:21.56] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, that's right.

[00:22:25.02] TOM MERRILL: Maybe we should provide some context. That's our motto at American University.

[00:22:28.83] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Right, yeah-- AU's empire. In a way, Athens is the cause of all change, in the Periclean understanding that Athens is the universal necessity that forces everybody else to fall in line. And they're just this overflowing fountain of power and conquest.

[00:22:56.22] And all three of these virtues are explicitly warlike. Empire really is the spur and stage for it. And then, but you know, death-- it's tough to be flourishing when you're dead. And so that's why he also has to-- the last third of the speech is about immortal glory. And the thing that's really amazing about this claim, he doesn't just say that Athens itself is going to be remembered forever. Each individual soldier, he says, will be remembered forever.

[00:23:29.31] And I think, Tom, you really put your finger on something important. And this is kind of how Thucydides works. Thucydides doesn't record the name of a single fallen soldier. And in fact no name is recorded. These public funerals didn't involve the recording of any [INAUDIBLE]. So Pericles makes this claim and just quietly, no, everybody else sinks into oblivion.

[00:23:57.09] But I want to read a little passage from Thucydides where Pericles makes this claim about [INAUDIBLE]. For those of you reading along at home with your pocket Thucydides-- that's a joke. Thucydides is gigantic. It wouldn't fit in any pocket. But anyway-- this is chapter 42.

[00:24:24.39] TOM MERRILL: I keep it in my man purse, Borden.

[00:24:27.30] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah. This is 42, section 4, towards the end. This is one of the last couple of clauses. So this is Pericles talking about the following. And he says, "this thing we met fighting and suffering rather than surviving through surrenders. They fled only the stigma of dishonor and stood their ground with body in the field of action. And so in the fortune of a single moment, at a climax of glory, not of fear, they passed away."

[00:25:03.44] So he gives a picture of the dying Athenian soldier taking a stand against dishonor, and dying in this climactic moment of glory. And so he continues--

[00:25:17.23] TOM MERRILL: Just like a movie-- there's no suffering. They don't agonize. They don't say, oh, crap, what have I done with my life.

[00:25:24.89] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, exactly. There's no pain. There's no suffering. He mentions death only once in the whole speech, and that's to call it unfelt. It's a very kind of high-

minded speech. It's all about glory and virtue. And the actual suffering of the battlefield is minimized. Here you have this is one brief moment. And what happens in that moment? They're transformed into immortal glory. That a person becomes a memory, an eternal reputation.

[00:25:56.59] And so this is later. This is chapter 43, section 2. He says, "they gave their lives for the common cause, and so gained for themselves an enduring tribute in the finest tomb. Not the one in which they lie, but that in which their fame survives in eternal memory, to be celebrated forever in word and deed. The whole Earth is the tomb of famous men.

[00:26:20.98] And not only in their native land is the inscription on a monument to commemorate their lives. But in foreign lands, too, their lives on an unwritten memorial engraved not in stone, but in every mind." So dying this brief, quick, unfelt death brings the Athenians this kind of immortality. The empire serves to translate human beings into eternity in the medium of everybody's memory. So everybody remembers these soldiers individually.

[00:27:00.56] TOM MERRILL: Borden, do you believe that Pericles believes this?

[00:27:03.59] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Well, so it's not clear. And one of the things that's amazing about this speech is that there are little clues throughout that Pericles is dubious about the ability of glory. Is glory really going to last? It's clear that the individuals aren't going to be remembered distinctly. That's just kind of obvious. But Pericles is a smart guy. And so he has to register doubt.

[00:27:34.09] And he begins the speech by saying, well, it's risky to have everybody's glory depend on the speeches of a single speaker. We should honor them by deeds not words. And the doubt of words in relation to deeds is a consistent theme. So I think, at least from my take on it, the glory is a lure. It's to elicit the best out of the Athenians. And that it's the virtue story-- the virtue story is the real story. That in seeking for glory, the best is brought out in people. And so they live the fullest human lives as a result.

[00:28:20.87] The problem is that the price of that flourishing is risking death. And so how do you get people to do that? How do you get people to be on board with that, to live that flourishing life? And so the promise of glory [INAUDIBLE].

[00:28:35.40] SARAH MARSH: And Borden, help me with the image here. Is the suggestion that the funeral oration is being offered with a pyre, and the bodies of the dead are being burned together and their ashes are commingled. And so there's this sense of dissolution of individual bodies for a kind of collective Athenian honored dead, which is an interesting juxtaposition with what Pericles is actually saying.

[00:29:10.99] And so anyone who is witnessing the funeral oration would have seen these bodies being committed to eternal glory in a kind of corporate way, without the mention of individual names, without individual bodies.

[00:29:28.78] TOM MERRILL: Are they burnt? Are the bodies burnt?

[00:29:30.97] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, and one of the things that's remarkable about this-- I didn't read the specific sentence-- but in one place, he says that they gave their bodies in common and received eternal memory as a result. And there's this-- the Greek adjective *koine* for common, is used. And then the Greek adjective *idion*, or *idios*, for private is used. So in this one sentence he emphasizes both the private character of their bodily sacrifice and the way that that body sacrifice transforms them into individual glories. So he connects the good of the individual soldier with the memory that they receive.

[00:30:22.25] So this transformation-- I think it's great that you bring up the physical event of the bodies being burned and then being reduced to indistinct ashes. It seems like they lose their individuality in this process. And this is claiming that the bodies are given in common. And then out of that, what they draw is eternal memory of their virtues, and where their souls are liberated by virtue of this. It doesn't refer to souls. But it's like fame takes the place of their souls.

[00:31:03.28] There's not a-- it's a crappy afterlife in the Greek theological-- in Greek religion. It's not good to be a shade in Hades. They're just like the undead, kind of bumping around in Hades and jibbering. You know, when Odysseus meets Achilles in *The Odyssey*, he meets Achilles in Hades. And Achilles is not having a good time.

[00:31:28.75] So this isn't really-- Pericles is strikingly secular. The only time he ever refers to a god is when he says, well, if we run out of money in this war, we can take the gold off the statue of Athena, and use that. So this seems to be a better afterlife. The city actually provides for a better afterlife than the universe does because the individuals get their individual glory as a result.

[00:32:01.61] TOM MERRILL: But presumably glory only lasts as long as there are human beings to reflect that glory.

[00:32:07.08] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, that's what's remarkable. Because he makes a big deal about how it's a natural virtue that's being elicited Nature is in the background through the whole thing. And yet human convention is necessary. And this afterlife that he offers is purely conventional. It depends on there always being human beings. It depends on the Athenian empire always being around, at least being around long enough and impressively enough so that everybody's always going to remember it. And neither of those has room for a reasonable expectation.

[00:32:41.11] TOM MERRILL: So there are lots of other things in the funeral oration that are worthy of comment. I think my favorite is when he says, well, some of these people who died, they were actually big losers. If they hadn't done this, they would have done nothing good with their lives whatsoever, which is not exactly what I want to be said about me after I'm dead.

[00:32:59.54] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, and the best thing they did was die for the city. That really proved their virtue. Like, whatever else you have to say about Joe-- yeah, OK, Joe was a shoplifter and he beat his wife. But-- but-- he died for the city. And then he really came into his own. He's-- yeah, I mean, most of the speeches-- this very idealistic account of what it means to be Athenian, and then, at the very end when he's talking about glory, then his account

of life in Athens becomes a little more realistic. And yeah, these people aren't so great. And they face all these vicissitudes in life. But glory releases them from the vicissitudes of life. Yeah, you might be poor as an Athenian, but if you die for Athens, then you ascend into immortality along with everybody else.

[00:33:52.58] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, we should-- we need to turn to the plague.

[00:33:54.81] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah.

[00:33:55.50] SARAH MARSH: Well, so, the virtues that are set up in the funeral oration have a counterpoint in the narrative of the plague. And this reminded me a lot of our contemporary experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and the, I think, frequent assessment that these problems were here before the pandemic arrived. And it's the pandemic that sort of laid bare the bones of the body politic.

[00:34:25.65] And what I was thinking about, Borden, when you were talking about the virtues, is the way that the plague throws into relief some of the problems with what Pericles is asserting. Some of them are tied up in the tension between the individual and the collective. There's a very different kind of funeral pyre narrated in the plague. People are just sort of running around the city, throwing the bodies onto whatever burning fire they can find.

[00:34:51.03] TOM MERRILL: It's like a Monty Python sketch.

[00:34:53.14] SARAH MARSH: It really is.

[00:34:54.36] TOM MERRILL: Throw the body on the fire before someone else gets there.

[00:34:57.00] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, there's something, like, morbidly comic about it.

[00:35:00.30] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Oh, yeah.

[00:35:01.74] TOM MERRILL: Yeah.

[00:35:02.64] SARAH MARSH: So I thought that this is maybe a way to pivot, is to think about those virtues as something the plague sort of drums up in ways that don't look so virtuous all of a sudden.

[00:35:13.95] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, there's so much to that. So, for example, this easy-minded courage-- and I'll take it from the top of the plague.

[00:35:27.43] TOM MERRILL: Should we just read it? Can we read the symptoms? Sarah had asked, especially, to--

[00:35:32.33] SARAH MARSH: Yes, as a person interested in the history of medicine, I wanted to know what the symptoms are.

[00:35:37.11] TOM MERRILL: For the hypochondriacs out there, we can all compare ourselves. Do I have this?

[00:35:39.60] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, well, there's this whole strain of literary criticism where people try to diagnose characters in books. So, you know, in Dickens-- or they try to figure out what Jane Austen died of.

[00:35:51.00] TOM MERRILL: But a hypochondriac is seeking self-knowledge, right. So it's really only a slight exaggeration of what we do all the time.

[00:35:58.35] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, absolutely. It's just the absolute form of being an academic.

[00:36:04.27] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, so there's already tension between the virtue project and the glory project because the glory project requires, in a way, this sort of sham-- this belief in this sham immortality. And the central virtue in Pericles, in the funeral oration, is really facing the truth. And I think that is, in a way, the keynote, and through the whole dyad-- the funeral oration plague dyad. But in any case, I'll take it from the top.

[00:36:35.58] So it comes from Ethiopia, which makes it especially spooky. They don't know that it comes from-- Thucydides says, it is said it came from Ethiopia. Which is sort of like saying it just came from the ends of the Earth, from beyond anything we know. And it kills 25% to 30% of the population. I mean, imagine that. If COVID were doing that, we would be facing 80 to 100 million dead.

[00:37:07.24] And I'm not saying this to minimize how horrible COVID has been. And a lot of people have died. A lot of people have lost a lot of loved ones. But, I mean, this is mortality on an amazing scale. And people die in seven to nine days. So if you catch it, you're going to be dead in a week. So I'm reading section 49.

[00:37:34.09] "That year, as was agreed by all, happened to be unusually free from disease so far as regards the other maladies. But if anyone was already ill of any disease, all terminated in this. In other cases, from no obvious cause, but suddenly and while in good health, men were seized first with intense heat of the head, and a redness and inflammation of the eyes. And the parts inside the mouth-- both the throat and the tongue-- immediately became blood red and exhaled an unnatural and fetid breath."

[00:38:14.00] I always stop on this, like, "fetid"-- uh, do I have it too? "In the next stage, sneezing and hoarseness came on. And in a short time, the disorder descended to the chest, attended by severe coughing. And when it settled in the stomach, that was upset, and vomits of every kind named by physicians ensued. And these also attended by great distress. And in most cases, ineffectual retching followed, producing violent convulsions, which sometimes abated directly, sometimes not until long afterwards.

[00:38:51.50] Externally, the body was not so very warm to the touch. It was not pale, but reddish, livid, and breaking out in small blisters and ulcers. But internally, it was consumed by

such a heat that the patients could not bear to have on them the lightest coverings or linen sheets, but wanted to be quite uncovered, and would have liked best to throw themselves into cold water. Indeed, many of those were not looked after did throw themselves into cisterns, so tormented were they by thirst which could not be quenched. And it was all the same whether they drank too much or little.

[00:39:25.44] They were also beset by restlessness and sleeplessness which never abated. And the body was not wasted while the disease was at its height, but resisted surprisingly the ravages of the disease. So that when the patients died, as most of them did, on the seventh or ninth day from the internal heat, they still had some strength left. Or, if they passed the crisis, the disease went down into the bowels, producing there a violent ulceration. And at the same time, an acute diarrhea set in, so that in this later stage, most of them perished through weakness caused by it.

[00:40:01.05] For the malady, starting from the head where it was first seated, cast down until it spread through the whole body. And if one got over the worst, it seized upon the extremities, at least, and left it's marks there. For it attacked the privates-- genitalia-- and fingers and toes. And the many escaped with loss of these, though some lost their eyes also.

[00:40:24.59] In some cases, the suffering was attacked immediately after recovery by loss of memory, which extended to every object alike, so that they failed to recognize either themselves or their friends. Indeed, the character of the disease proved such that it baffles description. The violence of the attack being, in each case, too great for human nature to endure.

[00:40:46.89] While in one way in particular it showed plainly that it was different from any of the familiar diseases-- the birds, namely, and the four-footed animals, which usually feed upon human bodies, either would not come near them, though many lay unburied and died if they tasted of them. The evidence for this is that the birds of this kind became noticeably scarce. And there were no longer to be seen, either about the bodies or anywhere else, while the dogs gave still a better opportunity to observe what happened because they lived with man.

[00:41:15.37] Such, in general, was the nature of the disease, for I pass over many of the unusual symptoms as it chanced to affect one man differently as compared to another. And while the plague lasted there were none of the usual complaints, but if they did, [INAUDIBLE] it ended in this."

[00:41:35.42] So one of the first things he points out, after this horrifying catalog of suffering, is that when people got sick they were immediately seized by the worst despondency and despair, which he said was actually the worst part of the disease. And this is an amazing thing. He goes through this horrible suffering. And he says, actually, the worst thing about this whole episode, the worst suffering, was the despair that people fell into once they realized that they were sick. They saw what was going to happen. And they felt utterly helpless and despairing, and were taken away by the disease all the most quickly as a result of this.

[00:42:24.38] And the word that he uses for this despair is "athumia." The word "thumos" means something like fight. It's your spiritedness. It's your willingness to assert yourself. And athumia is the complete absence of that, that these people were completely deprived of the will to go on.

And athumia is this mordant pun on rathumia, which was the virtue of easy-minded courage that Pericles attributes to the Athenians. That the Athenians are-- they rush into battle light-hearted, having completely overcome the fear of death. And then so rathumia turns into athumia, this utter despair and weakness, such that they die all the more quickly.

[00:43:18.95] So as a result of this, society completely collapses. And I want to read this other passage, unless you--

[00:43:29.65] TOM MERRILL: Before you go on, Sarah, did you want to comment on the symptoms? Do you have some thought about that?

[00:43:34.36] SARAH MARSH: Well, yeah, so we were talking before we started recording, Borden, about the protean nature of the plague in Athens. And that it sort of takes on this series of forms, the last of which being the destruction of memory. And that struck me as a really important counterpoint to the claims that Pericles is making in the funeral oration, where he's talking about the memorialization of the Athenian dead.

[00:44:07.60] And the plague is of such a nature that it destroys even the capacity to remember, even the capacity to have a history. And the sort of protean nature of the plague from one that is physiological, that comes from the ends of the Earth, and then finally settles in history itself, or memory itself, obliterating it, seems really a suggestive counterpoint to the claims the Pericles is making for Athens in the funeral oration.

[00:44:38.18] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, that's marvelous. It's a marvelous observation. Yeah, because they can't even remember themselves. So this extraordinary claim that Pericles makes-- that each individual soldier is remembered as an individual-- has as its counterpoint these individuals not even knowing who they themselves are. They lose the ability-- in a way they lose their individuality completely. If nothing--

[00:45:02.76] TOM MERRILL: Were flowing away in the cosmic diarrhea.

[00:45:04.99] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Exactly.

[00:45:10.78] TOM MERRILL: Sarah, wait, wait.

[00:45:11.89] SARAH MARSH: Oh, that's great.

[00:45:12.68] TOM MERRILL: That expression was-- is that the final thought here though?

[00:45:18.15] BORDEN FLANAGAN: That's going to be my next book-- Cosmic Diarrhea. You've made my title

[00:45:26.32] SARAH MARSH: I think we have a podcast title, Tom.

[00:45:39.10] BORDEN FLANAGAN: So the translator who says that the plague baffled description-- in the Greek, it was beyond, or was stronger than, language, or stronger than

reason. It was [GREEK]. And the word that he uses is "eidos." The form of the disease was stronger than reason. And eidos is this word, it comes up in Plato. It initially meant the look of something or the shape of something. And in common usage it turns into sort of the nature of something or the character of something.

[00:46:20.65] And the thing that characterizes the disease is that-- eidos sort of means that the character of something is sort of what it is as a thing. What is its nature as a thing? What is its thingness? And the character of the plague is to defy thingness. Everybody who gets the disease has individual symptoms that nobody else gets. Even the general symptoms of the plague defy any one disease. All pre-existing diseases are folded into it.

[00:46:59.64] It incorporates-- it hits all the different systems of the body. So it seems to incorporate all these in all of the diseases. It changes the behavior of animals that feed on the dead. The birds disappear. It changes the way-- unlike other diseases, it's not specific to a species. It affects all animals, regardless of species. The survivors lose their extremities. So it deforms them. They lose their ability to procreate or to produce others of their kind.

[00:47:40.48] So it destroys their ability to recognize themselves. So they become unrecognizable. They become formless to themselves. So it's part of the spookiness of this, because it kind of stands-- it's unnatural. It doesn't-- it's nature is to have no nature and destroy all natures

[00:48:06.16] TOM MERRILL: But Borden, some people do survive, right. So Thucydides says that he had the plague and that he survived. So it's not all chaos all the way down.

[00:48:15.98] BORDEN FLANAGAN: No, well--

[00:48:16.83] TOM MERRILL: Immediately [AUDIO OUT] all the way down.

[00:48:19.17] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Right, yeah. One of its unpredictable features is that some people survive. So we don't know what it's going to do. There are survivors. And he says that the people who survived felt momentarily immortal, like they can't be killed-- by any disease, at any rate-- because they've come through this universal disease. It's a universal biological solvent, but there are survivors. And you can't tell who's going to survive or who isn't.

[00:48:56.55] TOM MERRILL: Do you want to read the bit about the social effects?

[00:48:59.59] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah. Yeah, 53, absolutely. So the society collapses. This is section 53. "In other respects, also, the plague first introduced into the city a greater lawlessness, for where men hitherto practiced concealment, that they were not acting purely after their pleasure, they now showed a more careless daring." So again, careless daring-- the virtue that Pericles ascribes to the Athenians has its inverse in this careless daring.

[00:49:39.54] "They saw how sudden was the change of fortune in the case, both of those who were prosperous and suddenly died, and of those who before had nothing, but in a moment, were

in possession of the property of the others." So people die. Rich people die and then the poor move into their houses in their stead.

[00:50:01.18] "And so they resolved to get out of life the pleasures which could be had speedily, and would satisfy their lusts, regarding their bodies and their wealth alike as transitory. And no one was eager to practice self-denial in prospect of what was deemed honor, because everyone thought that it was doubtful whether he would live to attain it. But the pleasure of the moment, and whatever was in any way conducive to it, came to be regarded as at once honorable and expedient.

[00:50:27.71] No fear of gods or law of men restrained. For on one hand, seeing that all men were perishing alike, they judged that piety and impiety came to the same thing. And on the other, no one expected that he would live to be called to account and pay the penalty of his misdeeds. And nobody cared about the law because nobody expected to live to see trial.

[00:50:49.49] On the contrary, they believed that the penalty, already decreed against them and now hanging over their heads, was a far heavier one. And that before this fell, it was only reasonable to get some enjoyment out of life."

[00:51:04.67] TOM MERRILL: This is what the economists call shortened time horizon.

[00:51:07.41] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Exactly. Right. An extreme future [INAUDIBLE]. So there are three basic pillars to the Greek polis-- kinship, piety and law. And each of these is completely destroyed. Kinship is destroyed because people are so exhausted and frightened of the disease that they stop caring for their sick relatives. And when their sick relatives die, they toss them on whatever funeral pyre happens to be burning.

[00:51:50.87] The dead are piling up. They can't burn them fast enough. And everyone's exhausted, emotionally as well as physically. And so, people are tossing their dead relatives on whatever pyre happens to be burning, which is a gross impiety. I mean, it's gross. It's also a tremendous impiety. And it's a betrayal of the family bond. So kinship's out the window.

[00:52:15.95] Nobody cares about law because nobody thinks they're going to live long enough to see trial. And maybe the most interesting thing is that the sense of what's noble changes as well. So I want to go through these. The holy-- there's sort of these four axes of evaluation-- the just, the noble, the holy, and the good. I'm drawing from Plato here. But each of these, the content changes, but the category doesn't.

[00:52:55.26] So the good is no longer being a citizen and enjoying what you can get out of this imperial city. But its immediate pleasure. The politics becomes irrelevant because nobody's going to live long enough to engage in the political project. You're going to die in a week, so what the city has to offer is irrelevant. So the good gets narrowed down to immediate pleasure.

[00:53:27.32] The holy changes. The gods seem to be out of their minds. They're punishing us. And the pious are dying alongside the impious, so propitiating the gods becomes pointless. Nevertheless, they still believe in the gods. They would rather believe that the gods are

capricious and sending down this horrible plague upon them. They'd rather believe that-- that the gods can't be propitiated, but they're just punitive without any rhyme or reason, than believe that the plague is a meaningless mechanism. That they're simply dying for no reason.

[00:54:12.45] [INTERPOSING VOICES]

[00:54:16.81] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, I think it's about meaning. I think that-- well, I think two things. I think they would rather think that there's some explanation than no explanation. So I think they're just looking for an explanation. Even if they don't know what the meaning is, if the gods are doing it, there's some explanation that allows their suffering to be something not arbitrary.

[00:54:40.79] And I also think that they'd rather believe that there are gods witnessing their suffering than that they're just lumps of matter being redistributed in the cosmic diarrhea of matter. They'd rather believe that their deaths are touching something eternal, that there's some-- somebody is going to remember them, even if it's crazy gods. And so, that way, their deaths-- it's less like you're being consigned to oblivion if gods are throwing you into-- or are killing you for no reason. At least you'll be remembered by the gods, by the angry gods.

[00:55:27.33] TOM MERRILL: Do you think [INAUDIBLE] and do you think Thucydides accepts cosmic oblivion? Do you think that it's possible for a human being to say, I live in a world without meaning?

[00:55:39.68] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Good question. The picture that Thucydides paints is one of-- so you've got these two cosmic principles that he works through-- the history of motion and rest. He calls the war "the greatest motion." Athens is the city of motion. Sparta is the city of rest. And so you get this kind of pre-Socratic metaphysics where patterns are going to replay. But nothing that human beings create is going to last. It's all going to be swept away.

[00:56:31.88] There's, at the very beginning of the history, in this very eerie passage, he's going to talk about the war between Athens and Sparta, and he says, you know, in some future time, people are going to look back on the ruins in Greece, and they're going to think Athens is greater than it was because those vain Athenians, they're always building monuments to themselves. And so it's going to seem very impressive. And people are going to underestimate Sparta because Sparta doesn't do that. They don't put up these memories.

[00:57:01.32] And so the monuments are a really lousy guide to what actually happened, and the power that was actually [INAUDIBLE]. And so he tells you at the very beginning, all of this is going to be swept away. They're just going to be ruined. None of these political projects are going to last. And the ruins themselves don't tell the story. Glory of any kind, even if it's marble on the Acropolis, can't capture what it was really like.

[00:57:35.79] And so Thucydides seems to present the view that, yeah, all things human, all things living, will be swept into oblivion. There may be patterns--

[00:57:49.71] TOM MERRILL: He does tell this very funny thing, directly after the passage you just read, about how there was an oracle, and the Athenians interpreted the oracle one time, during regular circumstances. But during the plague it turned out it meant something else. And it's clear Thucydides thinks that people project onto the gods whatever their current-- as we say, current mood-- is.

[00:58:08.41] SARAH MARSH: [INAUDIBLE]

[00:58:10.41] TOM MERRILL: Yeah, and so what the gods are become continually reinterpreted in terms of-- but he's clearly seen through that, right. Like, he's asking us to recognize that for the absurdity that it is, I think.

[00:58:24.14] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah. Everybody's clinging to this statement from old. And there's this word that either mean famine or plague. And he says, well, if there's ever a famine-- and yet now everybody's reading it as a prophecy of plague. But if there's ever a famine, they would read it that way. So they just want there to be some explanation. They want their reality to be stable in some way, because it's become maximally unstable. And that's just making things up, reading the tea leaves, in a way, to connect your particular circumstance to something permanent. And it's especially--

[00:59:09.07] TOM MERRILL: Can I ask a question about-- sorry, just to compare this to our own situation. Because our reaction to the pandemic seems to me quite different than what Thucydides-- in fact, Thucydides presents a kind of liberation that people are now doing in public what they used to do in corners. And that means all kinds of shameful embarrassing things, like having sex in the street or something. That does not seem like our situation. We seem to be more locked down. Like, both literally, but also spiritually or intellectually or something. Does that seem-- and this is not a Thucydides question. This is just a-- does that sound right to you?

[00:59:49.91] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, I mean, they're pretty important differences. Who knows what would happen if the mortality of COVID were as bad as the Athenian plague. If 25% to 30% of everyone was dying, and dying in a week, then who knows how we would respond. There's also the difference that there was no sort of medical infrastructure. There was no public health anything of any kind. They're weren't even hospitals. Private people would hired doctors who were doing the best they could, but not really able to do a lot.

[01:00:33.70] So nobody is going to quarantine in ancient Athens because they don't really understand contagion that well. We do. And so we're hunkered down How would we act if hunkering down-- how would we act if the lockdowns were useless? How would we act if self-isolation had no effect? And, instead, we just had to face a 25% to 30% death rate. We might act differently. But in terms of--

[01:01:07.46] TOM MERRILL: But, the ancients, when they imagined living outside of the law, they have a much more, like, sin with gusto kind of view. Whereas our view is, you live outside of the law and you're going to sit at home and watch TV or something. But, you know, our [AUDIO OUT], our criminal is the couch potato.

[01:01:25.64] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, well, I mean, again, part of that, I think, is because most of us think we're going to live, right. If we were really convinced that we were going to die, I don't know that we would stay hunkered down. Are we more timid? It's a good question. Our response to COVID is conditioned by so many things. There's the hope of escaping it by hunkering down. There's a trust in medicine. There's the fact that we're moderns. And modernity is all about putting aside those crazy dreams of glory.

[01:02:11.42] Modernity begins roughly in Hobbes because, of course, everything's about political theory. But Hobbes is all about-- his big enemy is vanity. It's closely allied with religious fanaticism. We want to get away from these dreams of empire. We want to get away from these religious wars. Let's just focus on keeping the body safe. And modern natural science spirals out of that.

[01:02:39.29] What do our politics look like? We're concerned about protecting the body, security, prosperity. These are all great things, but I think it gives us a different attitude about life and death. And it makes us-- there's a way in which modernity-- and I would not trade modernity for antiquity. I want my penicillin. That sounds like a personal revelation. I mean, in general, I'm on board.

[01:03:11.45] TOM MERRILL: I can deliver this to you, Borden. I mean, there's, like, an app [INAUDIBLE].

[01:03:16.76] BORDEN FLANAGAN: I'm all in favor of modern medicine. But there's a way in which the modern project is all about length of life rather than quality of life. We're clingers. We're valetudinarians. And I think that conditions our response to the pandemic.

[01:03:36.32] TOM MERRILL: But Borden, in your reading of Thucydides-- so if the plague is a critique of Pericles-- so Pericles has this beautiful but very creepy-- right, I mean, he's talking about conquering the world. But if the plague gives us Thucydides' true sense of the human condition, then we're in this battle against the cosmic flux of the world. And so that Thucydides is more similar to the moderns who, you know, we want to have all of our drugs and be able to lock down at home and stay alive as long as we can. Is that a fair reading of your interpretation?

[01:04:15.76] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Well, I think it's right that Thucydides wants us to see through Pericles' glory project as crazy. And maybe even Pericles knows that it's crazy, as you suggested. And I think that affects how we view the virtue project as well. There's something kind of creepy about those imperial virtues-- and dependent on ever greater conquest. We need more people to fight to show our virtue.

[01:04:46.70] Two things-- I don't know that the virtues themselves-- I think the virtue project, we're meant to be highly dubious about. The actual virtues of facing death, really reconciling ourselves to it, and-- I mean, think of the central virtue of daring with deliberation-- really being clear-eyed. Really seeing the ugly and fearsome truths about the human condition. I think Thucydides is onboard with that aspect of what Pericles aspires to. If you can separate it from the imperial project, I think Thucydides is onboard with that.

[01:05:26.61] How that would cash out in terms of how you would live, I don't know that Thucydides-- when he says he's going to record the plague. He doesn't say he's going to record it so that we can do something about it. There's no sense that he imagines modern natural science or modern medicine. The plague is just one of these things that's going to hit. All you can do is face it. All you can do is face the oblivion. I don't think he imagines--

[01:05:59.78] TOM MERRILL: So in that way he would be different than-- I mean, modern medicine promises that we can stay alive for longer and longer. And, therefore, puts off the day in which we really have to confront the fact that everything we love is going to fall apart.

[01:06:16.46] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Exactly, yeah, yeah. Returning to this motion and rest theme, there's a way in which modernity wants to conquer nature and render it stable and sort of static. We want rest to win. Modernity is all about conquering nature and pinning it down so that we can be safe and live as long as possible, and maybe, imaginarily, forever. And for Thucydides, I think, the big lesson is we have to face the flux, we have to face oblivion. We have to face the fact that everything that comes into being passes away.

[01:06:59.58] And there's this question, right. I mean, this is something that the pandemic raises. Has modernity really conquered nature or has it just accelerated viral evolution? The plague has this uncanny, unnatural aspect to it, where it destroys the form of everything. It's like this potential for chaos latent in nature. And modernity doesn't want chaos. It wants stability. We want stability. But maybe modernity has actually only accelerated the unleashing of these terrible possibilities.

[01:07:44.27] There's something, like, early on in the pandemic, some new version of swine flu-- H1N1-- was discovered that was even more contagious. The morbidity-- I don't even know what the term is-- but the ability to cause death of swine flu is much worse than COVID. But it was not as contagious. And so if you had a swine flu that was as contagious as COVID, it would be much, much worse.

[01:08:12.69] So there's this question. Have concentrations of populations and livestock actually made this kind of a more [INAUDIBLE]. So I think there's a limit to how modern Thucydides is.

[01:08:27.10] TOM MERRILL: Sarah, do you want to ask the last question?

[01:08:29.56] SARAH MARSH: Well so, I've been thinking about a point you made earlier, Borden, about the way the plague alters the sense of time. And we've been talking about this a little bit, I think. But I also think our sense, in the contemporary moment, is not one of necessarily avoiding death, although that's part of it. The other part of it is, when will we go back. When will we go back to things being normal? When will we be able to have classes in person again?

[01:09:00.88] I think this is a question that a lot of American University students are asking right now, as we look ahead to next semester and next year. And I suppose that one of the things I'm wondering about is what kinds of returns to normal should we want right now? Or does

Thucydides give us a way to think about what a return to normal is like? And what might that mean for students who are here listening and wondering about what's coming next?

[01:09:33.17] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah. So, time-- the funeral oration, one of those things that's interesting about it is it sort of frames the individual citizen's life in a temporal project. You've got the imperial project of the city. And then that's going to launch individuals into immortality. And so you've got this imagined framework of eternity, and the destiny of Athens is sort of nested within that. And then nested within the destiny of Athens, you have the individual project of each individual citizen.

[01:10:11.07] And that's kind of how we understand the meaning of our lives. And when the plague destroys the civic project and any hope of glory, you get a new time horizon. And the new time horizon is the little time you have left, the whatever, seven to nine days you have. And the Athenians still construct some kind of meaning for their lives still within that. They're going to get what they can get. And it's just that they do so because the gods have gone nuts. And so there are all these-- they can reimagine what it means to be noble and just and what a good thing is, within that new time frame.

[01:10:50.50] So the pandemic-- one of the ways that I connected, in my own mind, the Athenian plague to the pandemic, is that we're all stuck on lockdown. We don't know what the future holds. We don't know if we're going to be able to go to the supermarket next week or next month. We've been disconnected from our habitual timeframes, and so there's a kind of dislocation.

[01:11:15.82] I mean, there's the specter of death. But there's also a disconnection from our understanding of how we fit into our futures. And the sense that I get is that there are a lot of people who have been brought face to face with what their lives mean, as a result of this. If you don't know what your future is, then it's tough to understand what your day means.

[01:11:47.28] And not just in a sort of practical sense of how do I organize my calendar, or what stock do I invest in if I want a return within a certain whatever period. It's not so much a prudential calculation as it is a disorientation around the question of meaning. What does life mean if I don't know-- am I going to have a job next year? How do I connect to some larger framework that makes my life make sense?

[01:12:23.31] And so I think-- first of all, I think being able to-- I mean, these are sort of piddling, practical responses to what is a very deep question. So let me step back and say, I think the most important response to this pandemic is to ask the existential question. This is an opportunity for us to really face the big question. Because the question of what our lives mean is always there.

[01:13:00.79] And it's like in Hannah and Her Sisters, when Woody Allen thinks that he's dying of cancer, and the doctor says, no, you idiot, this is nothing. And the camera shows him walking out of the doctor's office. And he is overjoyed because he's not going to die of cancer. And he runs down the sidewalk and he leaps in the air. And then he stops because he realizes, yeah, he is still mortal. He's still going to die at some point.

[01:13:22.59] And then there's a very funny sequence of him talking to the Hare Krishnas and the priests and rabbis. It's an opportunity for us to think about the deepest question and live more thoughtful lives afterwards, as a result. Because the questions are always there. And thinking about it actually makes life richer.

[01:13:43.55] Other than that, I mean, it'll be good when the university is clear about what's happening in the spring. It'll be good when we know how the public health system is going to respond to this. The more concreteness we can get, the better. That'll help us to understand how we're going to be spending our time over the next two, four, six, eight, twelve months. All these things will help us to reconnect with some kind of timeline that makes us feel more grounded and complete.

[01:14:19.67] But I think there's a way in which we can invest that hopefully increasing completeness with a better sense of the deep questions of life. And that's where we get to liberal education, folks. Because that's how you do it. That's what liberal education is about. It's reading the really deep accounts of answers to those questions and pursuits of those questions. And that makes all these individual moments resonate with the most important things.

[01:15:01.46] TOM MERRILL: Well, Borden, that's a great place to end. The pandemic is as an agent of liberal education, I think, is what you're trying to say. I assume only if we use it correctly, though. Or if we actually confront all those questions. But the questions might actually cause you to freeze up and to lockdown, which is oftentimes where I feel like we are as a society.

[01:15:31.60] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, I mean, right, they're frightening questions. But addressing them, I think, makes every moment much more vivid. And there are a variety of potential answers. And, in a way, Pericles gives us a model for this inquiry, because he doesn't want to just rest on some conventional answer that people make up. He wants Athenian flourishing to be a flourishing according to nature. And is there a nature? That's, I think, a question that's hovering behind it.

[01:16:00.79] All these questions, they're not just blank in the sense that you're going up against them and you bounce off, and you have nothing to think about. And you're left with your athumia, you're left with your despair. We've got a whole lot of rich resources for reflection on what a meaningful and full human life can be. And so if we face these questions with companions-- I mean, there are a lot of dead friends on this bookshelf behind me who are still alive in very crucial ways. And if you--

[01:16:35.14] TOM MERRILL: Creepy, Borden.

[01:16:35.97] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, well, you know, I've been alone for a while.

[01:16:39.00] TOM MERRILL: Are those ashes? No, wait, sorry.

[01:16:42.87] BORDEN FLANAGAN: No, but I mean--

[01:16:43.87] TOM MERRILL: You're pointing to books. The audience needs to know that he's pointing to books. He's not pointing to--

[01:16:47.89] BORDEN FLANAGAN: I'm pointing to books. And so--

[01:16:49.84] TOM MERRILL: --cremains.

[01:16:50.78] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yeah, no, no, no. No funeral pyre here. No, but, I mean, we have the companionship of these terrific books. And they offer a conversation that is, in the most important way, very much alive. And so gives us solace and interesting possibilities for [INAUDIBLE] human life means. And each of these possibilities illuminates a different aspect of life. And so experience just becomes richer in having the accompaniment of these thinkers and, even more, the accompaniment of these questions.

[01:17:39.90] TOM MERRILL: OK, folks, so that was Borden's replacement for the Paracles glory project. So he's going to stay alive through the books. So we're happy to hear that. Tell us how that works out. Borden, it's been super fun. We really appreciate it. You've got a ton of observations about the details of the funeral oration and the plague together. And so I learned a lot from hearing you talk about it.

[01:18:07.23] SARAH MARSH: Yeah, Borden, thank you.

[01:18:09.19] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me on this podcast. This is-- this podcast is marvelous. I've loved the ones that you've done so far. They've been a rich companion through this. And this is just great. Keep doing it.

[01:18:23.22] TOM MERRILL: Well, we're hoping to get all your students who love you, Borden, to listen to our podcast. So this was not entirely non self-interested on our part.

[01:18:32.68] SARAH MARSH: And I think Borden brings up the necessity. All those dead bodies and dead books on the shelf, we need to have an episode on Frankenstein.

[01:18:39.78] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Yes.

[01:18:40.47] TOM MERRILL: That's correct. We need an episode on Frankenstein, yes.

[01:18:43.84] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Absolutely.

[01:18:46.36] TOM MERRILL: OK, guys, we're going to call it quits. But we'll see you next time. And Borden, thanks so much for being with us.

[01:18:52.64] SARAH MARSH: Thanks, Borden. Bye, y'all.

[01:18:54.02] BORDEN FLANAGAN: Bye.