Project Humanities' Signature Lecture with author and podcast host Nora McInerny was easily the event I was most looking forward to in our Spring 2021 events lineup, and it did not disappoint. I had never realized just how much the concept of "toxic positivity" permeated into our everyday lives until I listened to Nora's podcast, *Terrible, Thanks for Asking*, in preparation for this event. What I took away from this 45-minute podcast was nothing short of transformative, leaving me with high expectations for Nora’s lecture and discussion.

Hosted on Thursday, 25 March 2021, Nora McInerny delivered an engaging lecture, followed by a conversation facilitated by ASU professor Dr. Sarah Tracy. In the first part of her talk, Nora describes her experience when she and her husband found out that he had a life-threatening brain tumor. As she tells this heart-wrenching story that eventually ends in her husband’s passing, she zeros in on the reactions and responses of people around her. Simple questions like, “How are you doing?” and responses such as “He is in a better place now” were particularly hard to bear, although as McInerny describes them, easy to say. These phrases exemplify the concept of "toxic positivity" because they are a weak attempt to make a negative situation positive, which thus lets the receiver of these phrases know that you are uncomfortable with their discomfort. In order to counter this unthoughtful and sometimes programmed response, McInerny states that we must become more comfortable with acknowledging the bad/negative feelings of others, which is something Americans particularly struggle with. This opened my eyes to the ways in which American society unknowingly perpetrates an environment built on toxic positivity as we tend to want to focus on success and moving forward at all costs. As someone who has grown up in this environment, I know I have a lot of work to do to ensure that I am emotionally available in a way that makes others feel comfortable in expressing a full range of emotions. As McInerny says in her lecture, growth hurts, and it requires us to change. The progression of her story not only inspired me to change myself, but it also gave me a better understanding of how toxic positivity can present itself in different situations.

One situation McInerny mentioned was related to her home state, Minnesota. Minnesota is consistently ranked in the top ten for the U.S. News and World Report's “Best States Rankings.” Shortly after she said this, McInerny asked attendees if they remember what
happened in 2020 in Minnesota. The Zoom Chat quickly flooded with people discussing George Floyd’s murder. McInerny used this to leverage the prominence of intersectionality in relation to toxic positivity, which I think was one of her strongest points. Despite being ranked as a "great place to live" in the USA, Minnesota actually represents a different reality for people of color. Minnesota’s ranking itself is an example of toxic positivity because it masks the harsh reality of many residents, telling them that they are not allowed to feel like Minnesota is not a great place to live. This point stood out to me because I think it effectively connects intersectionality with toxic positivity, which includes concepts like race, gender, class, ability, age, and sexuality--all concepts I had not previously related to toxic positivity.

I felt a really strong connection to the points McInerny was making despite not being able to relate to her personal experience, which I believe is a testament to her strong ability to engage an audience and the relevance of what she was saying. I was not the only one who felt a surprising connection to her story. Stand-out post-event survey comments included, “You'll never know how much this has impacted me and my healing from grief,” and “I was so touched and heard (and SEEN) during this event.” Something else I noticed in the post-event survey was attendees’ willingness to follow the event with self-reflection and concrete actions. More than one person mentioned that they wanted to watch Nora’s TedTalk, and someone even said that they immediately put her books on hold at the library. With all the wonderful feedback came some negative feedback, which I actually believe shows the very nature of the topic of toxic positivity. As McInerny mentioned many times, it is hard to accept that we may be the ones creating these toxic environments, and in order to change this about ourselves, we need to both self-reflect and practice empathy. Overall, the feedback shows that McInerny was able to touch the lives of others in the way that she touched mine in just a short hour and a half. I look forward to learning more about toxic positivity and implementing what McInerny expertly analyzed into my own life!