

## Article

# Plato, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien Using Literary and Philosophical Texts to Navigate Post-Pandemic and Political Teaching Challenges

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**Abstract:** We examine how Plato, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien responded to tumultuous times that included the ongoing reality of death through wars and plagues and social unrest. More specifically, we draw upon the historical backdrop of Plato's dialogues, C.S. Lewis's essay, "Learning in War-time", and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to bring to light important social and psychological dimensions of the learning process that may help students and educators navigate these tumultuous times that cause confrontation with death. We argue for a middle ground between emphasizing the "unprecedented" nature of events like COVID-19, the politically divisive state of affairs in America, the war in Ukraine, the devastation of earthquakes in Syria and Turkey, and the desire to find a new normal in the midst of world-wide turmoil. We first reflect on our experiences with pandemic teaching and learning. Then, we address some contemporary research on pandemic learning. Third, we turn to the historical backdrop of Plato's dialogues, specifically the Plague, The Peloponnesian War, the rule of "The Thirty", the restoration of democracy, and the Reconciliation Agreement in Athens. Fourth, we consider some of the effects of the first and second world wars for both C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Finally, we suggest that Gandalf emerges as a model of the middle ground we aim for in our pedagogical relationships.

**Keywords:** Plato; C.S. Lewis; Tolkien; COVID-19; Greek History; pedagogy



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How should we frame tumultuous times, troubling social political developments, and widespread existential anxiety that arises from confronting death in the classroom? Relatedly, how should we as teachers embrace our role as educator during such times in a way that is stabilizing for ourselves and for our students? Some possible answers can be found in the works of Plato, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien. In this paper, we examine how they—as well as the characters they wrote about—responded to death in tumultuous times. More specifically, we draw upon the historical backdrop of Plato's dialogues, C.S. Lewis's essay, "Learning in War-time", and Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* to bring to light important social and psychological dimensions of the learning process that may help students and educators navigate these tumultuous times. We argue for a middle ground between emphasizing the "unprecedented" nature of events like COVID-19, the politically divisive state of affairs in America, the war in Ukraine, the devastation of earthquakes in Syria and Turkey, discord throughout the Middle East, and the desire to find a new normal in the midst of world-wide turmoil. Ultimately, educators should be careful to demonstrate healthy responses to such turmoil. We may model our behavior after those in the past who also encountered such tumultuous times, while also turning to history to examine whether commonly used rhetoric is helpful, or even true.

To this end, we first offer some reflections on our experiences with pandemic teaching and learning. In the second section of the paper, we address some contemporary research on pandemic learning. In the third section, we turn to the historical backdrop of Plato's dialogues, specifically the Plague, The Peloponnesian War, the rule of "The Thirty", the

restoration of democracy, and the Reconciliation Agreement in Athens. In the fourth section, we consider some of the effects of the first and second world wars for both C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. Finally, we suggest that character Gandalf emerges as a model of the middle ground we are aiming for in our pedagogical relationships. We conclude that the classroom offers a space for hope and healing in this world where death pervades our reality.

## 1. Our Pandemic Experiences

### 1.1. C.D.'s Experience

"I went down to my office alone and listened to a recording of a discussion of Plato". This doesn't have quite the same ring as "I went down to the Piraeus yesterday with Glaucon" (Plato 2012, 327a). Though a writing instructor might say it's a bad hook, I would say it's a poor way of doing philosophy. True, recordings can be quite valuable—say, when one misses a discussion to present at a conference. But as we mark the fourth year since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, students and professors alike have had quite a heavy dose of online learning—some of it asynchronous, video lectures recorded without class participation, perhaps weeks ahead of time (and, in at least one case, from a lecturer who had passed away several years prior). This solitary philosophical life is not the same kind of philosophical life I entered into a decade ago as I sat with my friend Lexy discussing Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* and Elliott Smith's album of the same name. I remember that warm October evening in Texas. Basking in the sunset, we sat on the steps of the St. Edward's University main building, overlooking downtown Austin. Our eyes had just been opened to the world of philosophy through a freshman class called "Literature and Philosophy". We were so excited to make all these connections between the music we enjoyed, the literature that we read, and this thing called "philosophy" that had always been underneath it all. There was a sense of wonder that changed how we saw everything. That effect was far from fleeting. Soon afterwards, I changed my major, and later pursued graduate school.

I had been in grad school for one semester when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. I'm lucky, in a way; we've had two incoming cohorts of graduate students who know nothing of pre-pandemic graduate classes and department life. They have no recollection (and indeed, I have little myself) of what our community was like prior to 2020. Previously, Friday mornings were filled with a department colloquium and breakfast. We usually continued the conversation with lively discussion in the grad lounge. In 2020, that was replaced by Zoom feeds, each of us listening to a presentation as we brewed our coffee at home. There was no follow up discussion in the lounge, just a silent clicking of the "Leave Meeting" button. Unfortunately, we missed out on one of the most integral ways that we grow philosophically—through communal discussion. Though colloquium has now resumed in person, attendance has flagged. There is a marked lack of spontaneity in discussions amongst grad students, both inside and outside the classroom. In a way, the pandemic isolation lingers.

In 2023, I entered the dissertation phase of the Ph.D. program. I started teaching my own class—Introduction to Medical Ethics. As part of the class, I have students form ethics committees. They deliver a recommendation or ruling on what ought to be done in a case they are assigned. One such case involves deciding which of four patients with COVID in spring 2020 gets the only available ventilator. After reading through the case, a group approached me after class, looking quite serious and concerned. They said, "We want to clarify—if we give the ventilator to one person, the others will die, correct?" I said, "Yes, that is the idea". They asked, "So, are we killing the other three?" I said, "Well, that's the question isn't it?" But, this interaction—and some others I've had in the bioethics classroom—made me think about how my students are approaching such dilemmas differently now than they were in 2019. These issues, formerly theoretical in nature, are now real. Without a doubt, each student has been affected profoundly by living through a pandemic. These ethical dilemmas are now personal for every single student in the classroom. This shift to the personal makes clear that there is a sense of

uniqueness inherent in every historical situation that cannot or need not be disregarded as each situation with its particular and extreme challenges affects individuals who are forced to live through them in very particular and unique ways. Despite the obvious similarities with past events, these effects are nevertheless unique with respect to the particular individual.

### *1.2. Anne-Marie's Experience*

In November of 2019, news of the pandemic in China was beginning to hit America. My husband had gotten quite ill with COVID-like symptoms, including loss of taste, after spending a lot of time visiting his mother in a major hospital in Houston. We started to wonder if COVID was already here. By February 2020, the arrival of the pandemic in America was hard to deny. Even though some people said, "It was just like the flu", I didn't find that particularly comforting. My mother had died from complications of the flu in 2018. I got quite sick in early March of 2020 and was simply grateful for making it to Spring Break. It never occurred to me that Texas would completely shut down two days into Spring Break. Our university, like many across the nation, extended Spring Break for a week so we could prepare to shift to online learning for the rest of the semester.

Amidst the panic, I thought to myself, how timely! I was teaching our graduate seminar, Workshop in Teaching Philosophy, which is a semester-long course that prepares our students to be instructors of record. I figured that if I mess this Zoom teaching up, at least we will have the opportunity to talk about teaching mistakes not to make in the Zoom Room. In addition, the students will get to practice teaching and learning on Zoom before they have to do it as instructors of record the following semester should the remote learning still be with us which, of course, it was.

Truth be told, I did not do a lot to prepare for the different classroom experience. I had done a little bit of Zoom teaching for some friends interested in yoga philosophy. That had gone well. Also, I felt that graduate seminar was small enough that we all fit on one screen could just have a discussion much like we had a discussion around the seminar table.

Fortunately, I had guest speakers scheduled for the first two sessions after our return. That gave me some time to get used to the new pedagogical space. The first thing I learned is I had to be flexible about bandwidth issues. Some students were navigating shared bandwidth with family members and had to be audio only. I learned almost immediately that my fondness for asking open ended questions needed to change. I had to be willing to call on students regularly, repeatedly, and systematically. I also set aside time for personal check ins with the students in class. I have carried these practices back into Face-to-Face teaching. We start most classes with some conversation about how their weekends were and how their other classes are. Then, we start talking philosophy.

## **2. Teaching and Learning Research about the Effects of the Pandemic**

Anecdotally, every teacher or professor I've spoken to has noticed some change in post-pandemic students, not to mention the changes in the art of teaching itself. Students seem to be sensitive in ways they weren't before. They arrive with different expectations regarding attendance, group work participation, due dates, and their own academic efforts. Data which continues to come out since 2020 supports these observations. For one, the mental health crisis facing students has gotten even worse as a result of the pandemic. According to the Pew Research Center, ER visits by adolescents for suicide attempts went up by 31% in 2020, compared to 2019 (Vestal 2021). Meanwhile, a September 2022 study in PLOS One notes a "significant" decline in personality traits of extraversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, especially amongst young adults (Sutin et al. 2022). If it feels like students are different after COVID, or that they respond differently to some material and situations than they used to, that's because they *are* different. How we approach learning, both as students and teachers, has changed noticeably since 2019.

Furthermore, the pandemic has normalized distance learning technology that appears to be here to stay: namely, Zoom. Classes continue to be offered virtually (synchronously or asynchronously) and blended between students sharing physical and digital spaces. Zoom allowed us to continue teaching and learning during the height of the pandemic, and in a way, it democratized classrooms, conferences, and lectures. Anyone from anywhere in the world with a working internet connection and a webcam or mic could participate in discussions that were previously available only to those who lived in the area or had the funds to travel.

For all its benefits, Zoom has also introduced a number of challenges and barriers to education. One practical barrier is access to the internet. We take it for granted that everyone has access to the internet; yet, students in rural areas and students with low socio-economic status often do not have equal access to the internet and may rely on public Wi-Fi to attend class. Additionally, some empirical studies on the psychological effects of Zoom present troubling evidence that (1) Zoom is physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausting in ways that in-person meetings typically are not (Fauville et al. 2021a), and (2) That exhaustion is worse for women than it is for men (Fauville et al. 2021b). Jeremy Bailenson theorizes that Zoom Exhaustion Fatigue (ZEF) is caused by four factors: eye gaze at a close distance, cognitive load, an all-day mirror, and reduced mobility. Amongst other things, webcam distance approximates physical proximity usually reserved for close family and friends, leading to psychological discomfort at perceiving classmates and coworkers taking up that space. We find looking at ourselves on screen exhausting, and our mobility is limited by the feeling that we must remain on-screen and attentive throughout a class or meeting (Bailenson 2021). These factors present novel challenges for educators to overcome (or at least mitigate) in the post-2020 classroom. As Fauville et al. conclude: “As the world transitions to the post-pandemic era, in which the future of work is likely to be hybrid, it will be important to maximize the benefits of video conferencing while reducing the psychological costs, especially given that these costs are born unequally across society” (Fauville et al. 2021b, 12).

These experiences before, during, and after the pandemic, have led us to examine a few central questions regarding how education, and educators, should navigate post-pandemic challenges in the classroom. One is: *How* should we frame or approach a crisis or existential threat in an educational environment, like the university or the classroom—whether virtual or in-person? Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have received numerous emails from advertisers, employers, conference organizers, and administrative staff lamenting how very “unprecedented” these times are. And, to a certain extent, that is true. These specific circumstances have never occurred before—at no other time in history has a virus called SARS-CoV-2 forced schools to hold classes on a platform called Zoom, in order to avoid serious illness or death through exposure to the virus. But, generally speaking, pandemics and wars and the deaths that they cause are hardly unprecedented. The question which looms over all this rhetoric is whether it is helpful for students and teachers to think of these times as unprecedented. Does framing times of turmoil—from pandemics to wars—as unprecedented comfort us, or help us navigate both virtual and physical classrooms?

### 3. Plato: Pandemics and Politics

Plato’s philosophy is often associated with the famous image of him pointing a finger up to the sky in Raphael’s famous *School of Athens*. As lovely as *School of Athens* is as a work of art, it conveys a misleading image of the nature of Plato’s own works of philosophical art. While Raphael’s Aristotle is pointing down toward concrete reality, it is actually Plato who wrote dialogues about real people, like Socrates, who were deeply involved in the social and political realities of their day. In many ways, Plato’s Athens, the Athens of the post-plague, post-Peloponnesian War and post-reconciliation agreement is not unlike our own. We live in a time of intense political turmoil in a world shaped by a pandemic that caused widespread death.

First, a bit about the plague. In 430 BC, a plague arrived in Athens. According to Littman, it probably originated in Ethiopia and spread across the Mediterranean. At the time, Athens was extremely overcrowded because so many people sought the protection of the city walls because of the Spartan advances in the outlying areas. Over the next three years, Littman notes, “most of the population was infected, and perhaps as many as 75,000 to 100,000 people, 25% of the city’s population, died” (Littman 2009, p. 456). Like our own plague, it came in waves. According to Littman, “the epidemic broke in early May 430 BC, with another wave in the summer of 428 BC and in the winter of 427–426 BC, and lasted 4.5 to 5 years” (456). Unfortunately, we may well still have a few years to go in navigating our own.

The experience of the plague and the subsequent loss of moral norms and behaviors certainly shaped the philosophical views of both Socrates and Plato. The historian, Thucydides, who contracted the plague and survived, wrote about the societal effects of the plague in great detail. He attests that “the plague was the starting point for greater lawlessness in the city. Everyone was ready to be bolder about activities they had previously enjoyed only in secret” (Thucydides 1988, 2.53). Thucydides elaborates, “Neither fear of the gods nor law of man was a deterrent, since it was judged all the same whether they were pious or not because of seeing everyone dying with no difference” (Thucydides 1988, 2.53).

The plague had economic effects also. Thucydides explains that there was “sudden change for both those who were prosperous and suddenly died and for those who previously owned nothing but immediately got their property. And so they thought it appropriate to use what they had quickly and with a view to enjoyment considering their persons and their possessions equally ephemeral” (Thucydides 1988, 2.53). This economic chaos extended to burial practices as well. Thucydides reports, “Many of them, in the absence of relatives because of the number who had already died, turned to shameless burial methods; some put a corpse of their own on the pyres of others and set fire to them before those who had built them could, while others put the body they were carrying on top of another that was being burned and went away” (Thucydides 1988, 2.52). Overall, Thucydides paints a gruesome portrait of the devastation. He writes, “the crowding in from the country to the city oppressed them all the more, especially the new arrivals. Since they were without houses but lived in huts, which were stifling in that time of year, the devastation did not occur in an organized situation, but the dead and dying lay on top of one another, and half-dead men tumbled in the streets and around all spring in their craving for water” (Thucydides, 2.52). Dr. Schultz has added these descriptions into her Classical Philosophy course and has found that these details make the fact that Socrates and Plato philosophized with these events as a backdrop more relevant and inspiring for the students who have themselves just lived through a plague.

There are a few places in the dialogues where Plato might be alluding to the plague. Consider the *Charmides*. Charmides’ morning headaches are probably due to overindulgence the preceding evening. But headache was also thought to be one of the early symptoms of the plague. In the *Symposium*, Eryximachus explains “When the sort of Love that is cruel and impulsive controls the seasons, he brings death and destruction. He spreads the plague and many other diseases among plants and animals” (Plato 1989, 188b). Another direct reference to the plague occurs when Socrates introduces his story about Diotima, “She was wise about many things besides this: Once she even put off the plague for ten years by telling the Athenians what sacrifices to make” (Plato 1989, 201d). Ironically, this delay probably would not have been in the best interest of the Athenians in that the timing of the plague and the start of the war made the overall situation worse by causing even more death.

Socrates and Plato were also no strangers to political turmoil. Both fought in the Peloponnesian War. Socrates at its beginning in the battles of Potidaea and the retreat from Delium. Plato fought in the ending years of the war when it was clear Athens was going to lose. The Peloponnesian War ended in 404 BCE. The terms of surrender for the



Athenians were harsh. They had to dismantle the long walls, burn their ships, and lost their self-governance. Lysias writes, “Lysander sailed into your harbours, that your ships were surrendered to the Lacedaemonians, that the walls were demolished, that the Thirty were established, and that every conceivable misery befell the city” (Lysias 1930, 13.34). Lysias describes some of the actions: “Not even in respect of the smallest fraction of our property did we find any mercy at their hands but our wealth impelled them to act as injuriously towards us as others might from anger aroused by grievous wrongs” (Lysias 1930, 12.20). Sadly, Polemarchus and his family were merely one example of the violent actions of the Thirty. Lysias reports “They sent many of the citizens into exile with the enemy; they unjustly put many of them to death, and then deprived them of burial; many who had full civic rights they excluded from the citizenship; and the daughters of many they debarred from intended marriage” (Lysias 1930, 12.21).

A group of Athenian democrats backed by Spartan enemies from abroad fought them. Democracy was restored in 403 BCE. The *Apology* alludes to this historical context. After reporting the oracle’s response, Socrates refers to Chaerephon’s brother as a means of verifying his account because Chaerephon is dead. Socrates then remarks, “Gentlemen, do not make a disturbance at what I say” (Plato 1997, 21a). Why are the jurors responding in such emotional terms to Socrates’ contextualization of the story he is about to tell? Socrates’ reference to the exile under the Thirty and his reference to Chaerephon’s death provide us with two clues. Barry Strauss explains that when the Thirty began killing pro-democratic citizens, “those who survived financed an anti-oligarchic movement in the mountains outside Athens, with help from Sparta’s rivals abroad. Within a year, the movement grew into an army. The democrats defeated the oligarchs in battle” (Strauss 2013, p. 32). This defeat happened only four short years before Socrates’ trial. Socrates’ remark challenges the current political peace by reminding them of how tenuous political self-governance is. No doubt, no one in the courtroom liked to be reminded of how recently democracy had been restored. The jurors would have been highly attuned to Socrates’ reference in this context. On this point, Raaflaub notes, “Trained for decades in the skills of recognizing political allusions, the Athenians would have picked up hints of tyranny much more frequently and easily than we suspect” (Raaflaub 2003, p. 72).

This profound civic conflict should shape our understanding of the inquiry into the nature of political justice in the *Republic*, particularly given the historical fates of Glaucon and Polemarchus, each dying on opposite sides of the conflict with the Thirty. Mallet explains, “In only half a century, the conception of conflict radically changed. Conflict was no longer about fighting an alien threat but about civil war, war between people sharing the same culture (or, even worse, people from the same city). This context forms the foundation of Plato’s political thought and shows how urgent it was to define a new conception of war and peace for Athens in order to avoid a new era of conflicts” (Mallet 2017, p. 89). Somehow the Athenians were able to move ahead and be accountable to each other despite the great harm that the two factions imposed on each other. Despite the challenges of this deep factionalism, some level of political functionality did arise after democracy was restored. Childs notes, “Despite the ravages of the Peloponnesian war, Athens managed to assuage the horrors of political strife, to engage in foreign ventures, and especially to rebuild her economy. The Piraeus again became the major center of trade in the Aegean, as it had been under the Athenian empire of the fifth century” (Childs 2018, p. 21).

How were they able to accomplish this rapprochement? Several aspects of the situation are worth noting. First, as democracy was restored, the Athenians took an oath to harbor no grievance against each other with respect to public crimes that had occurred during the rule of the Thirty. As a result, “each side was able to set aside their differences and reconcile” (Löning 1987, p. 13). Second, a renewed emphasis on the importance of written law began to emerge. Munn explains, “The process of authorizing the *nomoi* of Athens now had in view not only the prospective work of the Athenian *demos* and its officers, but was also seen as the way of preserving the essential and time-tested practices of the Athenians against the possibility of future subversion” (Munn 2000, p. 269). Third, there

were numerous jury trials about the harm that citizens inflicted on one another because personal crimes were not covered by the amnesty oath. By examining extant speeches from these trials, it is clear that “despite the fact that forgiveness was prominent in the rhetoric of reconciliation, Athenian juries were repeatedly subjected to emotional appeals to those recent events” (Munn 2000, p. 279). Fourth, Munn explains that the reunification was made more complex because “the Athenians were now two: those who had remained in the city during the reign of the Thirty, and those who had fought against them to return from exile” (295). He continues, “the reunification proceeded from the recognition that there were ‘men of natural nobility’ (*agathoi*) on both sides of the divide” (295). As we confront the divisive discord of our own political landscape and the current threats to democracy, we would do well to hold fast to this possibility of recovering from divisive factional harm that the Athenians displayed.

#### 4. Lewis and Tolkien

Lewis and Tolkien were educators, and both reflected on the impact of events which were also called unprecedented—namely, the first and second World Wars. Although there are, obviously, differences between wars and pandemics, the parallels are difficult to ignore. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and WWII disrupted university studies to a significant degree. Both produced a sense of existential dread. In each case, young people were forced to confront the reality of death—indeed, widespread, painful, and often indiscriminate death. And, finally, both sparked significant civil unrest and class division. Thus, in this section, we will use the language of “turmoil” to generalize the response to both WWII and the COVID-19 pandemic.

##### 4.1. Lewis

In October of 1939—just over a month after Britain entered World War II—C.S. Lewis delivered a sermon to an undoubtedly nervous audience at Oxford’s St. Mary the Virgin Church. He encouraged them to continue with their studies even under dire circumstances, stressing that war does not erase their duty to a learned life; rather, it heightens and necessitates carrying out that duty. A veteran of World War I and a dedicated scholar, Lewis shared insight from his own experiences on the front lines, empathizing with their situation and providing them with the example of someone who had not only survived but flourished following turmoil that had seemed, to many at the time, insurmountable. Much of what Lewis says about war sounds eerily applicable to us as we remain impacted by ramifications of a global pandemic.

Of all Lewis’ arguments in this essay, perhaps the most striking in light of COVID-19 is the idea that “unusual” circumstances such as war or pandemics are far more normal than we think—and it is helpful to be reminded of that. War, says Lewis, “creates no absolutely new situation; it simply aggravates the permanent human situation so that we can no longer ignore it” (Lewis 1980, p. 49). Humanity is always embroiled in conflict, and notably, some of our greatest achievements are born in times of great turmoil. It is, Lewis argues, in our nature to “propound mathematical theorems in beleaguered cities, conduct metaphysical arguments in condemned cells, make jokes on scaffolds, discuss the last new poem while advancing to the walls of Quebec, and comb [our] hair at Thermopylae” (50). Working, discovering, and carrying on with our lives during conflict is part of the human condition. But, as Lewis notes later, humans are also excitable. We have a tendency to tell ourselves that turmoil is highly abnormal, when it is at most slightly abnormal. We ask ourselves how we could possibly be expected to get anything done when the world appears to be falling apart. Yet, Lewis argues that “we are mistaken when we compare war with ‘normal life.’ Life has never been normal” (49).

Lewis raises a good point here that educators today should take note of. As we noted earlier, pandemics aren’t unprecedented—the 1918 Influenza Pandemic is so recent, in fact, that some survivors lived to witness (and contract) COVID-19. Even Socrates practiced philosophy in the wake of the Athenian plague and the Peloponnesian War. Such

circumstances are not unprecedented nor abnormal in human history. But is it good for us to frame this as a not-so-new normal? Or, on the other extreme, should we treat great turmoil as completely unprecedented? Lewis thinks it is more helpful to point out the many ways in which people have done important, beautiful, and profound work during similar times in the past. It is harmful for scholars, he argues, to think that we are alone in human history. This way of thinking relates to Lewis' first "enemy of the scholar" in wartime: excitement. Excitement involves feeling as though we cannot focus on anything else when the world is in such a state. We must be wary of the temptation to occupy ourselves only with thoughts of how dire the situation is and to wait for the situation to improve, because, as Lewis says: "favourable conditions never come" (60). The world is never really accommodating of scholarly peace and quiet. Putting our studies on hold until there is peace may very well mean that we will never pick them up again.

One might worry that all this is a little too harsh. Is Lewis implying that we tell students the world never has been, nor ever will be, normal, and to continue working as they did before? It could seem that way at first glance, but Lewis' message is more nuanced than that. He acknowledges that sometimes things really are so bad that one cannot help but focus on the situation at hand, and to resist that pressure would take an act of "superhuman self-control" (60). Sometimes, we cannot help feeling distressed. To respond that way is only human. Lewis does not imply that it is wrong to feel despair; rather, that to *only* feel despair is unhealthy. Furthermore, the essay itself is meant to advise, comfort, and aid students who feel lost or hopeless. He offers actionable points to help students pursue what he frames as the duty of a learned life. Lewis' perspective may seem unconventional to some now, but it is far from harsh or unfeeling. Educators can learn from Lewis' nuanced approach to framing the situation. He might say to students today that these times are not entirely unprecedented, nor are they entirely normal—there is no such thing as "normal". At the same time, we must not expect ourselves to respond unfeelingly to a situation which is, to put it lightly, highly stressful.

#### 4.2. Tolkien

Like Lewis, Tolkien was a veteran of the First World War. The "animal horror" of WWI's trench warfare that he experienced was, in a sense, unprecedented (Carpenter 1977, p. 84). Likewise, the use of bomber airplanes in WWII, which Tolkien referred to as "Mordor-gadgets", struck civilians and soldiers alike with a new kind of unprecedented terror (Carpenter 1977, p. 129). Nevertheless, in war, much remains the same. Tolkien wrote letters to his sons, Christopher and Michael, as they served in WWII. He recalled his own experiences in the first War and found that he sympathized greatly with his sons' experiences, and that sympathy itself revealed something terrible: two great wars had happened in his lifetime. He remarked to Michael, "one War is enough for a man" (Croft 2004, p. 127). And, as with the first World War, soldiers returning from WWII were often "shell-shocked". The trauma associated with combat is reflected in the character of Frodo from *The Lord of the Rings*. As Croft notes, "One of the grimmest lessons *The Lord of the Rings* teaches about war is that some of the mental wounds it causes never heal in this world" (133). Frodo's wound from the Morgul-blade never heals, and when he returns home to the Shire, he finds that he is not emotionally capable of embracing his former life. He remarks to Sam, "I have been too deeply hurt. . . I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me" (Tolkien 2014b, p. 1006). The mental effects of war are the same, both in England and in Middle Earth.

Though Tolkien did not write on war as directly as Lewis did, his characters offer their own perspectives on war, trauma, and turmoil. This exchange between Frodo and Gandalf in *The Fellowship of the Ring* lends insight to both Frodo and Gandalf's outlook as war with Mordor looms on the horizon:

I wish it need not have happened in my time,' said Frodo. 'So do I,' said Gandalf, 'and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us. (Tolkien 2014a, p. 50)



Gandalf and Frodo differ in their perspectives regarding the unprecedentedness of war with Mordor. Frodo implies that this sort of thing happens once in history and laments that it is *his* time in history. Yet, Gandalf reminds Frodo that he is not alone. Others have seen “such times” as well, and they have had the same worries. In fact, at the time of this exchange, Gandalf has been wandering Middle Earth for approximately two thousand years. He has seen much of war; he knows that this is not the first time that the united forces of Middle Earth have fought Sauron. Nor was Sauron the first of his kind. (See Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 31, [Tolkien 1977](#)). Gandalf provides the reader with a kind of God’s eye perspective on the past, present, and future of Middle Earth.

Through Gandalf, Tolkien provides us with an example of leadership in times of turmoil. We ought not dismiss students’ fears during such times. Labeling life during a pandemic as a “new normal” may downplay students’ fears and anxiety over a situation which is, to them, completely unprecedented. On the other hand, showering students with reminders of how “unprecedented” everything is might heighten their anxiety. Gandalf does not respond to Frodo’s concerns by telling him that this is simply how the world is now. He does not belittle Frodo’s fear by downplaying the severity of the situation, or by dismissing it as *so* preceded that Frodo is silly for being frightened. Nor does he build up Frodo’s fear by lamenting how new, dark, and terrible everything truly is. Instead, Gandalf is, for the most part, frank but gentle. He proceeds to tell Frodo the history of the One Ring and does not shield him from any of its past, no matter how terrible. Furthermore, he reminds Frodo that others have been in similar situations, though that does not make the current situation any less dark or unique in its historical and cultural detail. He counsels Frodo on the decision of what to do with the Ring, but does not make the decision for him. And finally, he reminds Frodo: “I will always help you” ([Tolkien 2014a](#), p. 60).

Gandalf is Frodo’s mentor and, at least informally, his teacher. He possesses knowledge of history, gathered both through personal experience and studies, that Frodo does not. Typically, he avoids sharing this knowledge of the darker parts of history with hobbits, and is instead known for his spectacular fireworks displays (and for being somewhat mysterious). However, the events in *The Fellowship of the Ring* necessitate that he draw on his knowledge to help and guide Frodo. He chooses to help Frodo by demonstrating a serious but measured response to the brewing turmoil, while giving Frodo the knowledge necessary to make his own decision about what attitudes and actions *he* deems appropriate. Similarly, educators today can show students that we are not alone in history without over-dramatizing or minimizing the severity of our present situation. Students may then draw on those historical examples gain an informed perspective on, and form a careful response to the present.

## 5. Conclusions

In sum, students cannot learn to respond to turmoil in an emotionally healthy way if their teachers are incapable of modeling thoughtful, kind, and reasoned behavior. Approaches to pedagogy have evolved over time, and many (including the authors) now prefer a collegial, collaborative environment in which teachers and students discuss ideas together. Nevertheless, even in these less hierarchical environments, educators maintain a position of authority—both over students, and over their scholarly area of expertise. Students look to teachers to indicate what attitudes and behaviors are acceptable or fitting in response to unfamiliar situations. It is important that the teacher, then, first adopt an appropriate attitude towards turmoil, and then demonstrate it in their interactions with students. We can learn what an appropriate attitude looks like through the examples of our predecessors such as Plato, Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis. Lewis likely would not want us to frame these times as either unprecedented nor normal, but rather as tumultuous times that have arisen throughout human history and during which our ancestors have produced some of the greatest art, philosophy, poetry, and technology known to humankind. We must not be unfeeling and behave as though nothing is happening, but we also must not create panic and despair. There is a mean between these two extremes that Lewis is pointing to.

Gandalf is the exemplar of this mean. He is very serious. He does not mince words; he does not sugarcoat. His discussion with Frodo is sobering. But it is not intended to produce a panic, or imply to Frodo that they are alone in history. Such threats have been defeated before, although the particulars—a Hobbit carrying the ring of power to Mordor—are new. These times are not to be taken lightly. They are disruptive; the Shire will never be quite the same, at least not to Frodo. But he is not alone.

As educators in these times, we should share these details of past tragedy and trauma with our students. Like Lewis and Tolkien, we might sympathize with students' experiences, drawing on our own memories. Or, as we have done in this article through the example of Athens and Plato, we might discuss similar stories from history, examining how others have responded to pervasive death in the past and what lessons we can learn from them. In doing so, we can continue to learn from past thinkers as we confront our present realities and realize that we, too, are not alone as we confront the ongoing reality of death from war, plague, and social unrest.

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