these students about to be doctors still have a certain appreciation of the superlative, or of the profundity of what’s superlative in human life that all of their analytic science hasn’t — at least as yet — washed out of them. Now, whether they don’t lose even more of it in the process of the technical training is a worrisome question, and one that I am very concerned about.

MOYERS: You tell a remarkable story about a man you knew, a man with an amazing mind — powers of memory, powers of understanding — who died. Can you tell me that story?

KASS: Yes, this was a truly extraordinary mind, and I don’t think I feel particularly embarrassed to say that in his presence, or reading his writings, I always had the feeling that this was off the scale, that this was something —

MOYERS: Extraordinary.

KASS: — really extraordinary.

MOYERS: Genius?

KASS: Yes. And I knew him only at the end of his life, when he was a man of failing health and failing powers. He was hospitalized — and this was when we were still living in Annopolis — and I went to visit him in the hospital, as I had done a number of times before. And on the way into the room I asked the nurse, who was coming out, how he was doing. And was told, "Didn’t you know? He had died about an hour ago." And I walked in, in the room, and there he was, sort of lying in bed, very peaceful. And had I not been told by the nurse, would have taken him for sleep — for being asleep. And I don’t really know what happened in the immediate few moments, but I remember finding myself on my knees at the end of the bed now, and sort of thunderstruck. Here he was, but he wasn’t there at all. It was a kind of mocking of the life that was by the fates and the gestalt and — almost the smile on his face. And all I could think of was — where is he? And where is this mind? What’s happened to it? And this phenomena of the extinction of a human being, so awful whenever you encounter it, and only, I think, more so under these circumstances, because so unexpected, and because what was lost was really so great. That, it seems to me, gives anybody pause in thinking that one is going to have an adequate bodily account of what you mean by the human soul.

MOYERS: Where are all the books that were not written, all the thoughts that were inarticulated?

KASS: Right, and which no one else is going to write.

MOYERS: And you say, "Here there was vastly less than meets the eye. The dead body may be more than what our science teaches, but it is also less than what it appears to be. The body may be more than stuff, but the man seems to be more than his body."

KASS: Well, this is the companion story, really, of the experience in the anatomy laboratory. I mean, there the students come upon this body. And they respond to it as if, in fact, the body is somehow more than the stuff that science has taught them. On the other hand, my encounter with this death makes it perfectly clear that here’s a still warm body which is not yet the man. And that’s not a problem to be solved, I think, as much as it is a deep and profound mystery to be acknowledged. On the one hand, we are, in a way, our bodies. I mean, our individuality is written into our fingerprints.

MOYERS: Those are not like anyone else’s.

KASS: Right. And each of our blood cells are — every cell in our body bears the mark of our own unique genetic makeup. That’s why it’s so difficult to transplant and so on. On the other hand, even as we speak there’s a way in which our bodies are silent and we are participating in some medium of understanding which is hard to reduce simply to body. And at the moment of death, one is acutely aware of the fact that however much we are self-identical with our body, there seems to be something about human life that is not simply reducible to or identifiable with this hulk that we otherwise are.

MOYERS: You take a step from reflecting on mortality, on the fact that we will die, to reflecting on our conduct, on morality. What explains the connection between the two in your thinking? In other words, if I’m going to do, I might as well burn the candle at both ends. Is there a difference between dead and good and dead and bad? Why not live it up?

KASS: Well, fair enough. I think the fact that we don’t have world enough and time really sets the boundaries within which it is up to us to decide what to make of our limited three score and ten. And one response is certainly to say you go around only once, you might as well really enjoy it. I mean, we’re all sitting in the desperation bar together and we might as well have a good time and go out cheerfully. But it seems to me most of the lives of human beings that have stirred us and that we admire are people who have dedicated themselves not to the elementary pleasures, but to something noble, something fine, something that reaches beyond the low pleasures. It seems to me some encounter with necessity is the ground of taking one’s life seriously. It’s the ground of being sensitive to all of the really beautiful things in the world. It’s the ground of being open to the call of something higher in which we have a chance to participate, whether it be perpetuation of our young, whether it be the future of our country, whether it be the arts, or philosophy or music. And it’s the ground, really, of transforming what is otherwise mere necessity into an occasion of something really splendidly human. The Greek gods, the Greek poets made a lot of the difference between the humans and the immortals; the immortals are youthful and ageless and immortal, but their lives are very shallow. And one of my favorite passages is the passage in The Odyssey where Odysseus is offered immortal life by the goddess Calypso — who was very beautiful, and he spent seven years with her — but he turns this down to return home, quite self-consciously, to his mortal wife, Penelope, and, in a way, to live for friendship, for family, for city, for country. That really is what it means to live humanly in the face of the sentence of death.

MOYERS: And is this because he is aware, one is aware, of the finite nature of the sentence here, of the time here? Do you think that morality — the choices grow out of the knowledge of death?

KASS: Oh, I think absolutely. I think — I mean, the extreme case is, of course, courage, where people self-consciously put their lives at risk for the sake of some other cause or, in fact, even to display their ability to rise above fear and self-concern, all the things connected with survival. But I think this same kind of rising above the attachment to mere life is found in almost every display of human virtue, whether it be generosity, whether it be a certain kind of compassionate humanity. Time is all we have to give, and whether you give it all in one moment on the field of battle, or whether self-consciously you know that it is that which you are, in a way, spending and have a chance to make something of it. It seems to me, without the real awareness of the meaning of time, we couldn’t make our days count, and we couldn’t make our deeds worth remembering.

MOYERS: You make me think of the 90th Psalm, "Teach us to count — teach us to number —"

KASS: "To number our days, that we may get us a heart of wisdom."

MOYERS: In other words, by thinking about the days being numbered, we acquire wisdom.

KASS: Yes. Well, there’s a wonderful passage, I think it’s Augustine, that one should keep one’s body as if one were going to live forever, and keep one’s soul as if one were going to die tomorrow. And there’s a way in which it’s — there’s such a thing as thinking too much about one’s death, and one becomes morbid. But there is a way in which — I’ll speak simply for myself — at a certain point it became very clear to me that time was limited, and it mattered a lot how one looked at things, and what one did; and the world is a different place.

MOYERS: What was that point?

KASS: It was partially the birth of my children; and they are, in a way, daily reminders that one’s not a member of the frontier generation any longer. But especially the death of my father. I’ve always had this kind of image that he stood in front of me before the ditch, and he was no longer in the way, and the world is a different place. Everything looks different, I’m much more sensitive to all sorts of things.

MOYERS: What is the soul in Leon Kass yeard for, as far as you can identify those aspirations? You’ve got just about everything; successful scientist, physician, philosopher, father, husband, professor.

KASS: I guess having all of those works, it leaves one somewhat perplexed about what’s at one’s center. But I guess I would say I’m in the perpetuation business. I regard myself, in a way, as a teacher. I’m pretty much in the same business to keep alive certain kinds of questions and concerns, to make sure that those vital questions about what makes a human life worthwhile, what is a good community, what is the human good, that those questions not be submerged in our technical competence or a desire for prosperity. And that the young are wonderful, if you give them half a chance. These are the questions that really bother them, and if you provide them with the opportunity to think about those things, you give them the books that in a way raise those questions most profoundly and acutely, the little candle might stand up against the barbaric