

Sawbones 286: Sneezing

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Intro (Clint McElroy): Sawbones is a show about medical history, and nothing the hosts say should be taken as medical advice or opinion. It's for fun. Can't you just have fun for an hour and not try to diagnose your mystery boil? We think you've earned it. Just sit back, relax, and enjoy a moment of distraction from that weird growth. You're worth it.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Hello everybody, and welcome to Sawbones, a marital tour of misguided medicine. I'm your co-host, Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: And I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: Y'know, I didn't realize it, Sydnee, uh, Smirl-McElroy, but we have sort of stumbled on another little bit of a... little bit of a combo.

Sydnee: I guess that's true. We talked about a symptom... fevers. Or a sign, also. An elevated temperature is a sign, 'cause it's an objective finding.

Justin: Sorry, what?

Sydnee: A sign is something that like, the doctor finds on you. That like, measures. Y'know?

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: You wouldn't come to the doctor and say, "I'm complaining of a symptom of my blood pressure is low." Y'know?

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Do you know what I'm saying? Like, a sign is something that we measure objectively. And like, a fever is both. Because the temperature, you measure object—you don't come and say... I mean, but you do have symptoms. Like, things you feel and experience and complain about. Anyway, we're gonna talk about—we're gonna talk about sneezing.

Justin: People are always asking me the best Sawbones episode to fall asleep to, and I feel like I can make a really strong, compelling case to this one so far.

Sydnee: I'm just saying, like—

Justin: I'm sure you got another 15 in ya.

Sydnee: We have been asked before about signs versus symptoms, and I was just reiterate—

Justin: Have we?

Sydnee: Yes!

Justin: Alright.

Sydnee: We're gonna talk about sneezing, because we've all had a cold.

Justin: Yeah, it's been a rough... it's been a rough week at the McElroy house. Lotta cold symptoms goin' around.

Sydnee: It was really weird, too, because it's not like we gave it to each other, because we all got it within 48 hours. Which would be very odd for us to have spread it to one another, and almost makes me think we all got it from the same single source. It's very weird.

Justin: We did all lick that flagpole, if you'll remember. We all licked the same flagpole.

Sydnee: I didn't. I licked no flagpole, sir. Uh, but we have all been sneezing. The other morning, Cooper was in bed with us. Uh, I'll have no lectures. She's 18 months old. She's quite large. She's on top of me, don't worry. [laughs] Um, she couldn't sleep, 'cause she was sick. And then I was sick. And I started sneezing, and I thought she had slept through my sneezes and I had not woken her up until I heard a little voice say, "Bless you."

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, that was very polite, but now I've woken the child. Uh, thank you to everybody who suggested this. A lot of people wanted to hear about sneezing.

Justin: Yeah, it's uh... it's a really weird thing.

Sydnee: Sneezes are weird.

Justin: It's a weird thing that our bodies can get up to sometimes. [laughing] It is weird, objectively speaking.

Sydnee: They're weird, and I enjoy them.

Justin: You enjoy... okay. Well, let's dig—

Sydnee: I enjoy sneezing.

Justin: —a little deeper.

Sydnee: And we'll dig into that, but...

Justin: You like to sneeze?

Sydnee: I do. Thank you to Tamara and Heather and Katrina and Anne and Jules and Katie and Benji and Vicky. I don't know if they like to sneeze, but they want to know about them. All those people. Do you know why you sneeze, Justin?

Justin: [sighs] Okay, so, as I understand it, and who knows these days, public schools being what they are.

Sydnee: Well, we've established when it comes to medicine, you understand very little, so...

Justin: Okay, well. You're just blowing a bunch—like, your body is like, "Emergency. We got a bunch of nasty crap in here. Blow it out."

Sydnee: I mean, that's not far off.

Justin: Well, good. I'm glad.

Sydnee: I mean, that's a pretty good approximation. So you... so inside the lining of your nose, the mucus membranes that line your nose, are nerve endings. And you can activate these nerve endings in a lot of different ways. Right? Like, think of all the different things that can make you sneeze. So like, different smells can. Temperature changes. Um, most obviously, some sort of invader. A virus, a bacteria, something fungal, something like that. All sorts of allergens.

There are lots of different things that can drift into your nasal passageways, activate these little nerve endings, and send a signal to your brain that says, "Clean house."

Justin: Everybody out.

Sydnee: Everybody out. Evacuate.

Justin: It's adult swim. Everybody out.

Sydnee: Evacuate. So, what happens when you take a sneeze is, once they're activated, you take a deep breath in...

Justin: You just said 'take a sneeze.' Is that a medical term?

Sydnee: I didn't mean 'take a sneeze.'

Justin: [laughs] I'm leaving it in. It's a very—it's a fun...

Sydnee: You take a deep breath.

Justin: Okay. Before you take your sneeze.

Sydnee: Before you take your sneeze.

Justin: [laughing] A long week.

Sydnee: Anyway. Sorry.

Justin: Alright.

Sydnee: You take a deep breath, and all this pressure's gonna build up inside your lungs. And then, all of that air that you have, y'know, inhaled, that you're holding in, is expelled quickly through your nose.

Justin: And you just blast it out.

Sydnee: Achoo.

Justin: And it feels, um... it feels like um, uh, compulsory in a way that a lot of things in our body don't? It feels like... even more so than yawns, it's like, once that machinery gets going, it's like, I don't know.

Sydnee: You can't stop it.

Justin: Can't.

Sydnee: You cannot stop it. I'm telling you, you can't stop a sneeze.

Justin: Well, you can.

Sydnee: You can like, hold it in, but you can't...

Justin: Well, if you press the bridge of your nose... press on the bridge of your nose, it'll stop it.

Sydnee: That's—once the sneeze process has actually started, you can't stop it.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: You can... I know what you're talking about. You start to get that sensation, and so you press your finger to the bottom of your nose, and you can kind of prevent the sneeze. But once the sneeze machinery is turning...

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: It's too late.

Justin: It's a narrow window, though, for you to interrupt a sneeze.

Sydnee: It is a very narrow window. Uh, it also, at the same time that it sends the signal to like, shoot air out of your nose very quickly, it also sends a signal to close your eyes. You always close your eyes when you sneeze.

Justin: Oh, cool.

Sydnee: You probably guessed that. It seemed like that was happening. It always does happen. A sneeze comes out at around 100 miles per hour.

Justin: Dang!

Sydnee: That's fast. That's a fast sneeze.

Justin: Faster than a... [mumbles] Fast ball.

Sydnee: You can't sneeze—

Justin: I'm gonna edit in a baseball player's name there.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. You can't sneeze when you're asleep.

Justin: What?

Sydnee: Can't sneeze when you're asleep.

Justin: Really?

Sydnee: Yeah, those nerve endings are asleep.

Justin: Interesting.

Sydnee: You do not sneeze in your sleep. Did you think you sneezed in your sleep?

Justin: No, it's just like... it's just a cool thing that—it's just a cool thing to learn.

Sydnee: It can be triggered by things other than what I mentioned. Sunshine, like a sudden bright light.

Justin: Really?

Sydnee: Can trigger sneezes.

Justin: There's a, um... there's an episode of Pete and Pete about that.

Sydnee: Really?

Justin: Where uh, one of them... I think it's Ellen has to stare at the sun, because it makes her sneeze.

Sydnee: Mm-hmm.

Justin: And that helps her to stay awake, 'cause the night crawlers are trying to stay up all night.

Sydnee: That triggers—that can trigger the sneeze response. Um, exercise does in some people. The nerve endings on your face being activated. So plucking your eyebrows can trigger a sneeze sometimes.

Justin: Really?

Sydnee: Mm-hmm. And uh, so can sex. Some people...

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Just a... like the autonomic nervous system. Got some crossed wires there, and they sneeze during, or maybe associated with orgasm.

Justin: O-oh.

Sydnee: All these things could trigger...

Justin: Hm.

Sydnee: Trigger sneezes.

Justin: That would be a thrilling 15 seconds. [laughs]

Sydnee: It's just, it's uh... they—and what's interesting is, both uh... and this might be why I say I enjoy a good sneeze. Both an orgasm and a sneeze releases endorphins.

Justin: Really?

Sydnee: Yes. And it's—and they relieve muscle tension. So obviously, you get a lot more endorphins from one than the other. I'll let you guess. But you do feel...

Justin: It's a very satisfying thing, I think.

Sydnee: It is. I think sneezes are satisfying.

Justin: [laughs] You agreed with me very strongly about that. Much more strongly than I anticipated.

Sydnee: [laughs] Uh, you can shoot snot five feet with a sneeze.

Justin: Gross. Okay.

Sydnee: That's why it's important, when you sneeze...

Justin: Draculaaa.

Sydnee: Yes. Pull up that vampire cape. Sneeze into the crook of your elbow.

Justin: I know it's the worst. Especially if you're in short sleeves, it's like... it's miserable. It sucks. But it's better than your hands.

Sydnee: So we obviously, as humans, have been sneezing for a very long time. This is an old, uh, autonomic response there. It's not something that we just cooked up in the 1900s. Uh, Hippocrates had a lot to say about sneezing. There—both as to what caused it, and what you could do about it. And then just a lot of general observations.

I like sneezing. It's one of the things where uh, ancient medical writers just kind of wrote about it, because it's also not a big deal most of the time, right?

Justin: Right. Nobody's like, demanding a solution to this.

Sydnee: It's very rare that somebody's gonna come to your office with a chief complaint of repeated sneezing. It's usually like, I am sneezing as part

of a constellation of symptoms that I'm concerned about, or, I just happen to be sneezing, but that's not really the issue. Most people don't care.

Justin: It is funny when you—how the uh, the fun and satisfaction of sneezing dissipates so quickly when you chain several sneezes in a row. It just makes you feel like a ruined person.

Sydnee: Yes, that is very true. That is very true. Uh, one at a time is better.

Justin: I've sneezed recently, and like, my throat was in a weird... like, not ready for it or something. Something... I don't know what I did. But I like, really hurt my throat. Like, I sneezed wrong.

Sydnee: You injured yourself with a sneeze?

Justin: It was very embarrassing. I like... I like, strained my, like, right here? I like, strained these uh... I'm pointing at muscles, so you have to help the listener.

Sydnee: The upper part of your pectoral muscles there?

Justin: I like, strained `em, `cause I sneezed so bad. It was really embarrassing. I didn't tell you. Now I have. Dang it.

Sydnee: Um, Hippocrates believed sneezing came from the head, because the brain was overheated.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Or, perhaps, the ventricles in your brain. The holes. The openings. The hollow areas in there were overfull of humors.

Justin: Do the holes in your brain often get overfull with anything?

Sydnee: Well, there's like, cerebrospinal fluid in there.

Justin: Okay. Kind of a humor in and of itself.

Sydnee: No. That is not a humor. That's a real thing, unlike the humors, which are not. But you get too much—too many humors, too much humor of one. Too many of several. Either way. And it gets hot up there. There's air.

Justin: That's why I can only watch so many episodes of Dharma & Greg in a row, because I get too much humor. And I start sneezing like crazy.
[laughing]

Sydnee: [laughing] Air gets stuck, and then blown out very quickly. Like, the pressure builds up from all these hot humors in your brain. Uh, sneezing, uh, can be a good symptom if a person is in labor, Hippocrates believed. He thought that that was a good omen. If someone is labor and they start sneezing, things will be okay.

Justin: You gotta get that 'Hippocrates believed' early, because I'm always worried somebody's gonna get out of their car and like, say, "Sneezing is good if you're in labor! Okay! We're here everybody!" Like... [laughing]

Sydnee: He noted that, hey, sneezing seems to stop hiccups.

Justin: I would think so.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: At least momentarily. [laughs]

Sydnee: And he also just generally, kind of like I said, said, y'know, sneezing tends to be in and of itself not a big deal. Um, it's—even when it's paired—most illnesses that it could be paired with, it usually indicates that it's probably not a bad illness that you have. So like, a cold or something.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: And Celsus even echoed that belief, and went further to say that he thought a sneeze was a good sign that healing was occurring.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Which... I think we're just all getting the sense that a lot of the sneezing they were associating with maybe like, allergic responses, or like, very simple upper respiratory infections, no big deal. Um, Pliny the Elder, of course, had some wild ideas about sneezing. He warned that if you sneeze immediately after having sex, it could prevent you from becoming pregnant.

[laughs] I don't know where the mechanics of what... are happening...

Justin: It's such a wild... I'm trying to think of him working it into conversation. Just like, "Hey, fun fact... if you're trying to have a kid, one thing you should try to avoid is sneezing right afterwards, 'cause you can blow that sucker right out of there."

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: What a wild dude Pliny was.

Sydnee: He uh... he also said, if your head's feeling heavy, then just tickle your nose with a feather and make you sneeze, and then the heaviness will be gone.

Justin: Okay.

Sydnee: Which is cute.

Justin: Sure. Yeah. It'd be funny. Funny visual.

Sydnee: [laughs] Um, if you're sneezing a lot, and it's bothering you...

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: And this is a nice—this is a double duty. This can also be used for hiccups.

Justin: If you're sneezing a lot, and it's not bothering you, you're a pervert. [laughs] There, I said it.

Sydnee: [laughs] I like sneezing.

Justin: A lot, though? That's what I'm saying.

Sydnee: Touch—touch the nostrils of a mule with the lips. That means kiss a mule's nose.

Justin: Kiss a mule's nose. That means—hey, Pliny, nice try, man. Nice—you put the uh, the subject in a... we use the passive tense for most of them. That's kissing a mule's nose.

Sydnee: He also noted that, uh, old people have a harder time with sneezing than young people. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: But then he said... now, Theophrastus said this. It wasn't me. He was the one that was hatin' on old people, not me.

Justin: Well, I mean, if you use the evidence of present company, it... for this particular old person, it has become challenging. I hurt myself.

Sydnee: That's true. You injured yourself with a sneeze. Uh, he also noted that—and this is not a human sneeze, but since we're just talking about sneezing in general, that, um, he would prescribe... let's say you have a headache. A good cure for a headache, according to Pliny the Elder, was to touch an elephant's trunk.

Justin: That sounds like a Wesley Willis lyric, but please go on. [laughs] Touch an elephant's trunk.

Sydnee: If you can get the elephant to sneeze at the exact moment that you're touching its trunk...

Justin: What... then what?

Sydnee: Then the cure is more potent, and you're more likely to relieve the headache.

Justin: How bored were these people?!

Sydnee: I guess you could employ the feather method, perhaps. Maybe we could go back and like, utilize that piece of information. We tickle the elephant's... I wouldn't want to... elephants, I think, are beautiful, majestic creatures, and I am fascinated by them. But I also would not want to try to make one sneeze, 'cause I don't want to make an elephant mad. They're very large.

Justin: No, they're huge. Right.

Sydnee: And they could like, stomp on me.

Justin: This is why the life expectancy back then was like, eight.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: It's like, "Hey, check that elephant. I hate these sneezes. I'm gonna go put a feather in its nose. Hold my Capri Sun. Be right back. It's fine. I really hate sneezing."

Sydnee: Please, if you... well, this is for a headache that you would do this. That you would provoke an elephant sneeze.

Justin: Oh, right, got it. My head hurts really bad, and I'm gonna go kill myself with this elephant. [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs] I know that this is not a medical advice podcast, but I will offer the advice – please don't mess with elephants. Just look at them from

afar. Gaze at them in awe and wonder, and uh, amazement that you get to live on the earth alongside them. But please just... don't mess with their trunks. [laughs]

Justin: And don't eat at Jimmy John's. [laughs]

Sydnee: Yeah, while you're at it... listen, I loved the beach club as much as you might have. But please don't eat at Jimmy John's. [laughs]

Justin: Google it, if that seems confusing.

Sydnee: Yeah, that came out of nowhere. We're not anti-sandwich, we're just anti-Jimmy John's.

Justin: We are staunchly pro-sandwich, ma'am.

Sydnee: [laughs] We do love sandwiches.

Justin: We have made it clear on this program before, and we shall make it clear again: we are pro-sandwich. We're big fans. Meat, bread...

Sydnee: Just don't have your sandwich made by a big game hunter.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah.

Sydnee: Alright. Uh, Justin.

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: I have some more, um, wacky, historical sneezing facts. But before we get into that...

Justin: Yeah?

Sydnee: Let's go to the billing department.

Justin: I... a-choose to follow you.

Sydnee: Oh nooo. No, no, no, no.

Justin: Let's go.

[theme music plays]

Justin: Our first sponsor this week is Postmates. This is a wildly useful service. One of those things that reminds you how great things are – in some very specific senses – in the year 2019. [laughs]

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: If you need something brought to you any time of day, red wine at four, sushi at nine, a breakfast burrito at eight... now, if you need a breakfast burrito at nine o'clock at night, there they cannot help you. It's Postmates.

Sydnee: [laughs]

Justin: Uh, it's a personal food delivery, grocery delivery, whatever kind of delivery service all year round. It's the biggest on demand network in the US. If you need something, they will bring it to you. It's easy to get started. You just download the app for iOS or Android. It's free. And then you browse local businesses, and track your delivery in real time.

Sydnee: And I got a message from somebody who works for Postmates who assured me that they do not, in fact, judge you, no matter what you are asking for and what hour of day it is.

Justin: Good to know. Judgment free zone.

Sydnee: Judgment free.

Justin: Uh, for a limited time, Postmates is offering our listeners \$100 of free delivery credit for your first seven days. To start your free deliveries,

download the app and use code 'Sawbones'. That's the code 'Sawbones' for \$100 of free delivery credit for your first seven days when you download the Postmates app.

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Sydnee: I knew that, too.

Justin: And they have—

Sydnee: Also.

Justin: They have a great customer support. So, head on over to Squarespace.com, use the code... uh, sorry, Squarespace.com/Sawbones for a free trial. And when you're ready to launch, use the offer code 'Sawbones' to save 10% off your first purchase of a website or a domain.

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Now, Syd, you were about to surprise and delight me with more sneezing fun facts. And I can't wait for the thrilling conclusion when we heroically cure sneezing, and I've never sneezed. Thank you, science.

Sydnee: Oh no. Oh no. Uh, it's... I thought it was interesting, because again, sneezing is something that... I mean, I think it's fair to say, everybody does at some time or other in their life. And it's typically harmless, except for when Justin sneezes and injures himself.

So, there became all of these strange associations with sneezing, like these sort of, um, mystical kind of connections. Um, it was thought that sneezing at the table meant you might choke. Other people thought that a sneeze meant that menstruation was about to begin. Like, that signaled...

Justin: That is accurate—

Sydnee: No. It signaled an impending period. Uh, there is a biblical story of a woman who died of sunstroke, and then was brought back to life by sneezing seven times. Like a fit of seven sneezes, and was... revived.

Justin: How did she do the first one, would be my question.

Sydnee: That's a great question. I don't know. Uh, and it's also interesting. You see a lot of references to the concept that, if you sneeze after you tell a story, that it was a signal that the story was true.

Justin: True. Huh.

Sydnee: Yes.

Justin: You would figure if it was gonna have a tell like that, it's a better fiction if sneeze means that it was a lie, 'cause then it's like... it gives you away. Y'know what I mean?

Sydnee: It's very interesting. Sneezing had a lot of, like, um... it would— sneezing was seen as an omen of a lot of different things. Like in the

Odyssey, there's like, an episode where Penelope is talking about her—about Odysseus coming back, and getting rid of the suitors, and then, I think like, her son sneezes or something. One of the kids sneeze, and it's seen as like an omen from the gods that things are gonna be okay.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: It's written as like, "Oh, okay, good. They sneezed. Everything should be just fine. Don't worry."

Um, but sneezing had all kinds of strange, like, mystical and spiritual connotations. And the Greek philosophers thought that sneezing came from some place in the body that contained the spirit. So, that would make sense as to why... because it had this... like it was literally contained where the spirit is physically contained within the body, that of course it would have some sort of connection to a higher power, or a higher being, or whatever.

And so, this is why sneezing was seen in almost like a holy kind of light, or a meaningful light, anyway. Something connected to the gods. But like, you wouldn't... the Greeks wouldn't have said the same thing about like, burping. Or farting. Or something. Y'know, it did not have the spiritual connotations.

Um, what's strange is that... again, a lot of this was positive until the middle ages. And then you start to see sneezing still have this like, mystical kind of connotation. But it starts to take a negative turn. The idea that a sneeze could be a bad omen, a sign of some impending doom. And of course, this only got stronger.

A lot of this may have occurred because of the bubonic plague. And you had people who were quite sick, and sneezing, too. Which, obviously, was not like, the most serious thing happening to somebody with the plague, but could've also been happening.

And so, sneezing took on this ominous air, probably for good reason. Because if somebody near you was sneezing, and the plague's going around, and you start thinking, "Huh. Do they have the plague?" It could be pretty scary.

Justin: Right. Right.

Sydnee: And so, you start to see that, from the middle ages on, a sneeze usually means, "Hey, you want to go over there?"

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: "You want to hang out somewhere else, or..."

Justin: "I don't know anything about germs."

Sydnee: "I don't know anything about germs, I just know that I don't like that, and you should get away from me."

Justin: You are also blasting a bunch of gnarly stuff out of the front of your head. Like... it's intuitive.

Sydnee: Well, you totally are—you've probably seen the pictures. A lot of people have seen them, that they have like, the freeze... like, the stop motion pictures of somebody sneezing, where they show, like, all the snot and saliva and mucus and boogers and germs and...

Justin: It's rough.

Sydnee: Everything being blown out of your nose at 100 miles per hour, maybe as far as five feet away from you.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: I mean, it's pretty awful. Like, if that doesn't inspire you to want to like, dip your nose into the crook of your arm the next time you sneeze... I don't know what would.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, one quick thing is, there has been this belief throughout a lot of history that I still hear voiced today, that your heart stops when you sneeze.

Justin: Is that true?

Sydnee: No. Your heart does not stop when you sneeze. Of course not. That does not happen. But, the fear may come from the fact that, when you sneeze, the pressure inside your chest changes a little bit. And whenever you have, like, with breathing in or breathing out, the pressure inside, right? Surrounding, like in the thoracic cavity surrounding the heart changes. And whenever that happens, you can have a subtle change in your heart rate.

Justin: Huh.

Sydnee: And so, if there is a—like, if your heart is beatin' along at a certain rate, and then it slows down suddenly, and there is a slightly longer pause between the next two beats, you may sense that, when the next beat comes, it may feel...

Justin: Huh. Like a slow—yeah.

Sydnee: You may have an awareness of that next beat. It may seem harder or faster. Any time you're aware of your heart beating, by the way, we call it palpitations. That's all that means. It's an awareness of it. The feeling, or the sound, or whatever. If you are aware of it, you're having palpitations.

Justin: Huh! I didn't know that.

Sydnee: And it can be very disconcerting when it happens, and it may be that that happening enough made people think, "Did my heart just stop and restart?"

Justin: "My heart stopped."

Sydnee: Yeah, 'cause you might interpret it that way. Like, I really felt that next beat, was it... not beating for a second?

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Uh, but your heart does not stop when you sneeze.

Justin: That's a relief.

Sydnee: That is not true. Thank goodness. Otherwise, a lot of us would, y'know, die.

Justin: Yeah. 'Cause that thing's gotta pump. That's what I tell everybody.

Sydnee: Yeah. Um, now, with all of these different, uh, concerns with sneezing. Was it bad? Was it good? Was it a good sign? What did it mean about the person sneezing, or the people around you, or whatever if you sneeze? Uh, you can see where we would get into the question, "Why do we say bless you?" Or anything. Depending on where you live and what language you speak and what your culture is.

Justin: Right.

Sydnee: Why do we say anything when a person sneezes? Why is there a thing? Um, and it stems from this like, kind of religious connection to sneezing. Depending on your religious tradition, sneezing is significant in one way or the other. It could mean that you're expelling bad spirits. Like, a sneeze was seen as...

Justin: Like when I threw out all my Disaronno.

Sydnee: [laughs] Is that a bad spirit?

Justin: Let me try again. Like when I threw out all my Fireball. That's better.

Sydnee: Ahh, there you go. There you go. Yeah.

Justin: Yes. I was in my 30s. I had to move on.

Sydnee: It was time to—yes. So yes. It could be seen as like, good, you sneezed, you got all the bad magic out. Right? Other religious traditions saw it as a moment where you could lose your soul. You could accidentally sneeze your soul right out of your nose.

Justin: Just... how? How do you keep it in? [laughs]

Sydnee: Well, one thing is, as soon as you sneeze, someone should bless you.

Justin: And that will get your soul to stay back in your body?

Sydnee: And it's also a way of saying like, "Thank god you survived that sneeze."

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Sneezing was, like I said, it was seen as like a risky act, because some people believed that your heart stopped when you sneeze. So if you made it through the sneeze, it's like... ah, what a blessing. You have survived that sneeze to still be here with us today, and sneeze again in the future.

Um, in some cultures, specifically in Indian culture, a sneeze was usually a good sign. And so, you could even like, induce a sneeze intentionally for like, good luck.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Like, get some pungent herbs and smell them.

Justin: Get a good sneeze goin'.

Sydnee: Yeah. I can understand that. Haven't you ever sniffed pepper to make yourself sneeze?

Justin: Uhh... no. That's never... I didn't know you could do that.

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: I'll try it.

Sydnee: You've never done that?

Justin: No.

Sydnee: Really?

Justin: I've never done that. No.

Sydnee: Just me then.

Justin: Just you.

Sydnee: Okay.

Justin: It's weird that you had to find that out when we were recording a podcast for tens of thousands of our closest friends.

Sydnee: Uh, as far as who was the first person to bless someone, or say something to that effect after they sneezed, uh, it probably was, as I mentioned, during the middle ages when people started to make these like, negative connections to sneezing. That's probably where we see the origins of this. And this is debated. Like, I'm not gonna sit here and say I know the exact moment, because this is one of those, like, we have several theories, but nobody's 100% certain.

Justin: I hope we're not using a lot of our big thinkers on it, honestly. I hope... hope these are like, some D list big thinkers that are on this question, currently.

Sydnee: The cultural history of the sneeze is, in my research, a uh, a very interesting topic for one to explore in an essay, or a dissertation, is what I have learned.

Justin: Okay. [laughs] Okay. I rescind my snark.

Sydnee: The Romans, uh, started saying, uh... 'deus te adjuvet.' Uh, in response to sneezing during the time of the plague.

Justin: What's that mean?

Sydnee: "So help you God." And so, we believe maybe this was the beginning of the concept. Although, you could also say that to anybody who was like, sick. Y'know? Like, if they had the plague. Like, woof... good luck with that one.

Justin: So help you God.

Sydnee: Hope somebody helps you, because we don't have antibiotics. [laughs]

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: So we don't have a lot of plans. Uh, but one story that seems pretty pervasive is that Pope Gregory VII started the custom of saying 'may God bless you,' again, in response to the plague. The alternative that people would say before that was, "I hope you may rid yourself of the bacillus."

Justin: [laughs] What's the bacillus?

Sydnee: Like, the plague. The bacteria.

Justin: Oh, right. That's nice. I mean... it's a little less elegant.

Sydnee: Yeah. And so, I think 'may God bless you' was just like a better, like... well, that seems a little nicer and shorter, and a little less, uh... stiff. Little less stodgy, perhaps. It's pleasant. Just say that. Again, we have no idea what to do, so put it in a higher power's hands.

Justin: [laughs]

Sydnee: Uh, different languages and cultures have different words. So, depending on where you are, you can—people will say, obviously in the US, we say 'bless you' most commonly. 'Gesundheit,' which is German, but you can also say. Also, I saw 'prost.'

Justin: Prost?

Sydnee: Like you say, like...

Justin: That's like the cheers over there, right?

Sydnee: Yeah, same idea. You could say, uh, 'salve.' You could say 'evil spirits begone.' I found that there was... and you can look. It's fascinating, by the way. I read an entire Wikipedia article about just what you say in different parts of the world when someone sneezes. And in some countries, you don't say anything at all. You wouldn't want to acknowledge.

Justin: [laughs] You look straight ahead.

Sydnee: When someone sneezes. And then, if you must acknowledge it, you say something to them, and they should apologize to you. It's fascinating. If—I don't know, maybe it's just me.

Justin: No, I think if they're listening to this show, it's them, too.

Sydnee: In most places where you do say something when someone sneezes, it's a variation of either 'bless you,' or 'God bless you,' or 'God be with you,' or 'to health,' 'to life,' uh, something like that. Something about health and life and blessing and good fortune and good things coming to

you. Which is still connected to this idea that like, something bad has or almost has happened.

Justin: Right, you dodged a bullet.

Sydnee: Yes. And so, I mean, it all kind of calls to that. One I appreciated was a Jewish custom of, if a child sneezes, you pull their ear after they sneeze and say, "To health." And if they sneeze again, you pull the other ear and say, "To grow and thrive." I really enjoyed that.

Justin: [laughs] That's fun.

Sydnee: Yeah. Um, again, because y'know, you don't want your kids to get sick. You can see where these things would've developed in a time when a sneeze could mean impending doom, and your child sneezes, you can see where some of these kind of rituals would... would develop.

Justin: Yeah.

Sydnee: Um, holding in sneezes is a common que—I actually get this question not infrequently. Is it bad to hold in a sneeze, Justin?

Justin: Yes.

Sydnee: Do you know what could happen if you hold in a sneeze?

Justin: No, I don't.

Sydnee: So, most of the time, nothing. Right? Like, I mean, this is one of the—please do not stress about this. Most of the time, if you hold in a sneeze, absolutely nothing happens. However, there have been rare cases where bad stuff can happen from trying to hold a sneeze in. There was a case in the British medical journal of a 34 year old man who sneezed, and popped a hole in his trachea.

Justin: What?!

Sydnee: In his windpipe. In his trachea. Yes.

Justin: No way!

Sydnee: He was—they treated him, and he survived, and he was fine. But there was a case report of this. Now, is it likely that you're gonna pop a hole in your trachea? Of course not.

Justin: See, I think this is what I—

Sydnee: But did it happen this one time? [laughs]

Justin: See, I think this is what I did. I obviously didn't pop a hole in my trachea, but like... I think I like, accidentally somehow stopped it right at the end. Held it in, y'know what I mean?

Sydnee: Yeah.

Justin: And I think I hurt myself as a result.

Sydnee: There have been accounts of pulled muscles.

Justin: That's what—okay. I said that before I knew about that, right?

Sydnee: [laughs] I was more joking about the idea that you could pull a muscle sneezing, but y'know.

Justin: But it's here!

Sydnee: I'm sorry. I love you.

Justin: It's right here in black and white!

Sydnee: I just think...

Justin: I'm the victim!

Sydnee: I just think you and I are pretty sedentary these days, and we could both...

Justin: Be a little more active. Agreed.

Sydnee: [laughs] That's all I'm saying.

Justin: Agreed.

Sydnee: Uh, there have been accounts of broken ribs. Damaged vertebrae. Uh, you can damage your vocal cords.

Justin: Yes!

Sydnee: Yes, the larynx has been damaged from holding in sneezes. Pulled muscles, and even, uh, popping a hole in your lung. Pneumothorax.

Justin: Oh.

Sydnee: Again, I don't have any—I did not find a single case that said someone died from holding in a sneeze. Uh, but I did find all of these kind of scattered case reports. I don't think it's enough that you could put like, a risk on it. Like, what is the chance? What percent chance is it that if you hold in a sneeze, any these bad things are gonna happen? But will you find these rare reports every now and then? Yeah.

So, I would say, like, um... sneeze when you gotta sneeze. Don't hold it in. I thought one interesting point – this wasn't really a case, but it was a theoretical risk – was if nothing else, if you sneeze, and that mucus that you're trying to sneeze out doesn't go out, the theory was, could it go back up your eustachian tube into your middle ear and cause an ear infection?

Justin: Oh no.

Sydnee: I think that's a bit of a stretch, but I guess it's a theoretical risk. Either way, just like, protect the people around you.

Justin: Yeah, come on.

Sydnee: Just vampire.

Justin: Just vampire for us.

Sydnee: Just vampire and get the sneeze out, and it feels good. You get a little rush of endorphins. You don't, uh, pull a muscle like Justin did. You don't hurt your throat.

Justin: Mm-hmm.

Sydnee: Um, cats, dogs, chickens, and iguanas all sneeze. Iguanas sneeze a lot.

Justin: Really? I've never noticed.

Sydnee: Yeah, iguanas are one of the sneezin'-est animals. And um, African dogs use it to communicate.

Justin: Whoa.

Sydnee: And also, dogs can reverse sneeze.

Justin: What?! What is that?

Sydnee: It's like a sharp inhale. Instead of the air going out really fast, it comes in really fast.

Justin: That's bizarre. Dogs are weird.

Sydnee: Yes. Humans cannot do that, as far as I know. It's just a dog thing.

Justin: Y'know, I tell you what, Sydnee. A lot of times, Sawbones demystifies topics. I feel like sneezing is still as weird as it was when I walked in. It's just a weird thing that we still do.

Sydnee: It's just a useful... I mean, it's useful to very quickly evacuate things from your nasal passageways. And one of the jobs of those mucus membranes, and all those hairs, and all that stuff that's up in your nose, the cilia that's further up, one of the jobs is just to physically try to catch things before they can get down into your, y'know, your airways and your lungs. And if they're gonna catch them, you gotta clean them out, right? You gotta clean out those lint traps.

Justin: Yep.

Sydnee: And who doesn't enjoy cleaning out a good lint trap? I do.

Justin: I know I do.

Sydnee: And I enjoy sneezing.

Justin: [laughs] I've been Sydnee McElroy and...

Sydnee: Just cover it up. Flu season's a'comin'. Just cover it up.

Justin: Cover it up, get that shot. Uh, thank you all so much for listening to our podcast. Uh, we hope you have enjoyed yourself, and have not been feeling as I have for the entire episode, a sort of latent desire to sneeze. I would love to just blaze one right now. It'd feel so good.

Sydnee: Um, you mentioned, Justin, get your shot. I would say that flu shots, if they're not available in your area already, are going to be very shortly. I would start asking. I would start looking for those ads. Usually the pharmacies will start puttin' signs up about them. The health department will start puttin' signs up about them. You can ask your doctor about them.

But uh, get those flu shots. It's never too early to get the seasonal flu shot. I know people are already gettin' them. I'm getting tweets about them, and I

love it. If you want to share that you got your flu shot on Twitter and tag us or Sawbones, I always love to see that and share that. Spread the good word.

Justin: Um, uh, we are a part of the Maximum Fun network. There's a lot of great shows on there. You can find them all at MaximumFun.org. Um... our theme song is provided by the Taxpayers, intro and outro of our program is called Medicines. It's by the Taxpayers. They're on Bandcamp.

Sydnee: And we will be, uh, in Atlanta and Orlando this weekend.

Justin: That's right. I thiiink they're both sold out?

Sydnee: I don't think they are yet. Are they?

Justin: If you go to bit.ly/BecomeTheMonster, or McElroyFamily.com, and McElroy.family, any of those will work, and click on 'tours,' you can see. There may be a few for Orlando.

Sydnee: I thought there were a few for Orlando left.

Justin: Yeah. Yeah, I think so. But we're gonna be there.

Sydnee: Opening for MBMBaM on Saturday and Sunday in Atlanta, and then Orlando.

Justin: Yes. So please come out and see us if you can. That is gonna do it for us. So until next time, my name is Justin McElroy.

Sydnee: I'm Sydnee McElroy.

Justin: And as always, don't drill a hole in your head!

[theme music plays]

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Speaker 1: Listen, I'm a hotshot Hollywood movie producer. You have until I finish my glass of kombucha to pitch me your idea. Go. [slurping]

Ify: Alright. It's called Who Shot Ya? A movie podcast that isn't just a bunch of straight white dudes. I'm Ify Nwadiwe, the new host of the show, and a certified BBN.

Speaker 1: BBN?

Ify: Buff black nerd.

Alonso: I'm Alonso Duralde, an elderly gay and legit film critic who wrote a book on Christmas movies.

Drea: I'm Drea Clark, a loud, white lady from Minnesota.

Ify: Each week, we talk about a new movie in theaters, and all the important issues going on in the film industry.

Alonso: It's like Guess Who's Coming to Dinner meets cruising!

Ify: And if it helps seal the deal, I can flex my muscles while we record each episode.

Speaker 1: I'm sorry, this is a podcast? I'm a movie producer. How did you get in here?

Drea: Ify, quick! Start flexing!

Ify: Bicep! Lats! Chest! Who Shot Ya? Dropping every Friday on MaximumFun.org, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

[music plays]