



Grateful Terriers



President Nayef Samhat extends his gratitude to all Terriers and wishes everyone a happy and safe Thanksgiving in the video above.

Students, faculty and staff from across campus share their thoughts on gratitude in a year that's presented challenges and disruptions.

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Thoughts on Gratitude



By the Rev. Dr. Ron Robinson '78

Perkins-Prothro Chaplain & Professor of Religion

"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Whenever I hear that cliché, I cringe a bit. Many things aren't fatal but take an enduring toll. Perhaps that's why I find some odd humor in the t-shirt slogan, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Except bears. Bears will kill you."

As we enter our annual national time of Thanksgiving, I have been wondering if the notion of gratitude seems clichéd at best and unaware at worst. After all, we're in the midst of a health pandemic unlike any in over a century. And COVID isn't the only pandemic I see. We appear to be immersed in several others. Political polarization, racial tension and mental health pandemics are happening concurrently. Surely gratitude is in short supply. That's my hypothesis, anyway.

I decided to test this with my Religion, Literature and the Environment class. We've been learning how to read sacred texts through agrarian eyes. The students quickly noticed that practices like saying grace and expressing gratitude emerged from these texts. I gave them a simple, yet open assignment to reflect on grace and gratitude during November 2020. Is it possible, or even realistic? The responses I received were thoughtful and moving.

It turns out that gratitude is still around, at least among this particular group of 18-to-22-year-olds. They granted permission to share some of their thoughts without using their names. Space doesn't permit me to include all of their observations.

One student began, "Almost every meal we ate when we were kids, my brothers, cousins and I received a lecture from my grandmother on what we need to be thankful for — the farmers who harvested the food, the truck drivers who transported it, the grocery store workers who stocked it, and, of course, her for buying it and preparing it. All of this is to say that, at this point in my life, I am able to recognize the importance of being truly thankful for whatever food is in front of me, and not take it for granted."

Regarding the past months of COVID and quarantine, another said, "I am thankful for the slowness I have been forced into at times. In many ways, these small, fleeting moments are where I have been able to find the most joy. I feel that in a busy week during more normal times, such moments would be difficult to notice, let alone appreciate."

Another appreciative student said, "I have found myself being more thankful in these weird times. Whenever someone asks me how my semester is going, I quickly fire back, 'I'm just thankful that we're on campus.' Every time I say that, the act of saying it makes me realize how thankful I truly am for this time. I guess it was the prolonged monotony of this summer that lulled me into a sort of hibernation, only to be awakened by the infrequent social gatherings I have with friends that make me realize how thankful I am for them, for my family, the outdoors, quiet time, my dogs, coffee and good music."

A student from a rural area, who is taking the class remotely, writes about his small town of about 5,000. "Many people grow their food. We have many farms where they grow all kinds of vegetables and also produce their own meat. There is something pretty cool about supporting the people who do this. This is their job and their way of life. They support their family this way. Me personally, I am so thankful for them."

Yet another said, "I think if 2020 has taught me anything, it is to put the dang phone down and have real conversations and connections with people because no day is guaranteed."

There was some irony in the observation that, "It's really hard to say this because it's still going on, but I am really thankful for what 2020 has taught me. I have never been able to slow down and reflect to this extent." Another offered, "I have found that once the 'thank-yous' start, there really is no end." (They say really a lot!)

There were many more. Some were personal stories of challenge and resilience that left a lump in my throat. Others had me laughing out loud, like the student telling of the "formal dinners" she and her housemates have frequently. "When we are all together," she says, "we always go around in a circle and say our 'happy and crappy' of the week."

The students made insightful observations about the importance of not universalizing their experience and of recognizing their privilege. They noted that gratitude isn't the exclusive domain of the religious. They were very aware that, for most of them, this past year had been an inconvenience. For others, it has been devastating.

After class, I realized that the hour with the students had strengthened me, and I am deeply grateful for them.

I am wrong with my hypothesis. But bears will still kill you.

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