

GIVING THANKS

In 1969, I was teaching high school English in a missionary school on Okinawa. The school was run strictly, with high standards imposed on students and faculty, by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. All classes were conducted in English with standard American high school textbooks. In all of my classes, there were only four American students, native English speakers. Most of the students were from the Philippines, from South Viet Nam, from Taiwan, from Japan – from all over the Orient. For most of them, English was a third, or even fourth, language.

Many of us who taught there were wives of servicemen stationed on Okinawa. It was the height of the Vietnam war. For most of us, living on Okinawa was the first time we had lived outside of the U.S., and the experience of living so close to the war, with our husbands flying in and out of danger and with every day bringing sickening news of carnage and loss, was difficult. Okinawa itself was in turmoil, with anti-American sentiment building among the native populace and constant marches and riots intended to force the Americans to close military bases there and leave the island, which had been under American control since the end of World War II. And, back in the U.S., our colleges and our home towns were in turmoil, too, with constant marches and riots against the establishment, the military and the war. We often received hateful mail from friends at home because our husbands were participants in an evil war. We felt we were without friends anywhere; we felt displaced, misunderstood and abandoned.

Until we got to know our students, we complained a lot about life in those times under those circumstances, and we were feeling anything but grateful. We cried most of the time we spent together during orientation for faculty, before the students arrived. Our lives were filled with fear and uncertainty; the school was a primitive concrete building with hardly any decent supplies and inadequate plumbing and lighting. We were paid \$305 a year. It was the best job most of us could get and we all thought we needed to stay busy to keep the horror from closing in on us.

As we discovered our students' life stories, we heard remarkable tales of valor, sacrifice and dedication. Although the Sisters had told us that it was a noble task we had undertaken to change the lives and mold the future of young people, we soon knew that our students would affect us far more deeply than we could affect them.

One Vietnamese girl who was in my 10th grade English class, had been born in North Vietnam. Her parents had fled to the south when France had been at war with the north. Finding life in Viet Nam too dangerous and uncertain for a young child, they had sent her to live with relatives in Thailand, but those relatives did not have the means to care for her. So she had been moved to Okinawa, to stay in safety with a Japanese woman who was a close friend of her mother's, until her parents could find a way to emigrate from

Vietnam. Shortly after her move to Okinawa, her father had been murdered and her mother had gone into hiding. She believed she would see her mother again one day, but she had no idea where her mother was or when that day would come.

A Chinese boy in my 11th grade class was living with an American family who had agreed to take him in as a displaced child after they were approached by the Red Cross. He did not know what had become of his parents. He had been separated from them four years earlier, when they realized they were going to be imprisoned by Maoists, and gave him over to a small group of wealthy people who had bought passage out of Communist China through Hong Kong. In a perilous and terrifying flight, they somehow finally got to Okinawa on a stolen fishing boat. He was certain he would never see his parents again and could only pray that they were alive. He had changed his name and we never knew his real name because his father was an important political prisoner and he feared being discovered and brought back to China for torture and imprisonment.

A boy in my 10th grade class whose mother was a native of the Philippines and whose father was pure Japanese, had come with his mother to live on Okinawa after his father's family had refused to accept him or his mother because of deep racial and religious prejudice. His father had chosen his parents' way and turned them out of his home. His mother had five other children, all of different mixed racial backgrounds, and was an uneducated woman who worked nights cleaning facilities on the nearby Marine base. The children had to fend for themselves, and they lived at a subsistence level that would defy the imagination of most Westerners. Nonetheless, he arrived at school each day clean and well-prepared for his classes and was devoted to his mother. Every day, he set aside the piece of fruit the students were given with their meager lunch to take home to her.

These are a handful of the stories we came to learn. The students told their stories without drama and without sorrow. Their part of the world was in upheaval; they knew only political strife and war and flight and the eternal search for friends and family in safe corners of the Orient who might shelter them along the way. I recall these three students especially because of Thanksgiving.

Although our students knew very little of American customs and had no reason to celebrate American holidays, our school did not in any way depart from the traditional American school calendar. Thus, we made masks for Hallowe'en. We talked about the settling of the American colonies and the Pilgrims and the Puritans at Thanksgiving. We put up Christmas trees. We hid Easter eggs. The students went along with all of this with benign curiosity and a willingness to learn our customs because they all hoped, one day, to go to America for a life of peace and freedom where they could pursue their dreams. Their best chance of this was through scholarship; their diligence and persistence with their studies was extraordinary. Whatever we asked of them, they produced far more.

At Thanksgiving, I assigned my 10th and 11th grade class an essay on Giving Thanks. Three of those essays have stayed with me throughout the years.

The Vietnamese girl wrote an essay that started out, "I am thankful to know both enemies and friends." She described how in her early childhood, the "enemy" was the French. When her parents took her to South Vietnam, the enemy was the North Vietnamese. For the friends she left behind in the North, the enemy was the French, and then the Americans. When she went to Thailand, the enemies were Cambodian. When she came to Okinawa, where she was living among people from all those countries, she became confused as to who were enemies and who were friends. "In this school," she wrote, "I am so thankful to understand that there are no real enemies. The enemies we name are only friends we don't yet know."

The Chinese boy wrote an essay, illustrated with a beautiful pen and ink Chinese calligraphy which I still have hanging in my home, about his gratitude for education. He wrote about the harrowing escape among strangers, leaving his family behind forever, and about his nightmares of recapture. "But each day I come to school," he said, "where there are people who want to teach me things that open my mind to new ideas. I am safe here, and I have a place here that I belong which is dedicated to my improvement. My teachers do not degrade me or threaten me with prison for expressing my ideas. At first, I would never speak. I feared I would say something wrong and be beaten or tortured. But when I spoke at last, my teachers' eyes got wide and bright and they praised me. I did not know such a heavenly place existed on earth. I give thanks for my teachers and I give thanks that I can hope to teach one day myself and help the children to free their minds. Now I understand why my father was willing to go to prison for his ideas. It was his last freedom. He would not give up his last freedom."

The mixed racial boy wrote about his mother. She spoke not one word of English and she had never been to school. She was tired all the time from the work she did just to provide the little bit they had and keep her children with her. But she came early to every school event, and sat in the front row, a tiny woman whose flip-flops barely reached the floor when she settled into the seat, and she clapped and cried and smiled like crazy whenever her son was involved in anything. "My father and his family told me I was bad seed," he wrote. "They said I should not be born at all. They said I would have no place in the world. When we left there, I wanted to kill them and kill myself. My Mother said my soul was pure, regardless of my skin color or the shape of my eyes. She needs me to work to help with the smaller children, but she sends me to school anyway. I am joining everything here and I always try to get on stage because I am thankful for my mother's smile. Do you notice it too? I believe everyone in the room should be thankful for it."

I taught two years in that school. My students learned grammar and composition and the forms of literature. They learned to debate and they learned how to put out a school newspaper and a yearbook. I hope those things served them well and helped them along

their journey towards their dream. But those things seem so paltry to me in exchange for what I learned.

I learned how strong the human spirit is. I learned that hope is an infinitely renewable human resource. I learned that wisdom is ageless and unrelated to education. I learned that true gratitude is not for things, but for the deepest and most transcendent human qualities. I learned that love of life has nothing to do with life's events.

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