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Honors Thesis Personal Reflection

In August 2019, I began one of the most difficult and enjoyable tasks of my life: writing an honors thesis. Walking into a seminar room in DeBart and seeing the faces of my friends also majoring in English made me less nervous about the culminating project that seemed both overwhelming and small. I had no idea what the ensuing nine months would bring, but I had companions on the journey.

From August until December, the process became simultaneously more and less daunting. As I prepared materials to support my writing, my excitement grew; at the same time, I realized how much laid ahead of me. I applied to graduate schools alongside developing my topic and deepening my knowledge; the colloquium allowed me to better edit my writing sample. I jokingly referred to our twice-weekly meetings as group therapy for English majors, but I honestly believe it. I was much more prepared to write a thesis and approach my final undergraduate semester with people who shared my hopes and fears. We were honest with each other. The number of times I have sighed in relief that someone else verbalized my fears only served to affirm my own experience.

I never imagined that I would write my thesis about two contemporary poets who examine the domestic violence and segregation that permeated their experiences growing up. And yet, in December, Professor Harris posed this question to my cohort of thesis-writers: why, in the face of our generation’s existential threat—that is, climate change—do we continue studying the humanities? I’ve struggled with this question over the past year—why am I continuing to graduate school? Why do I insist on reading poetry? Why is poetry important?

The answer, for me, lies in the works of Natasha Trethewey and Colette Bryce. I have spent the last year immersed in their poetry, writing down lines to hear their voices. And their voices give me hope. Though they demand people to be held accountable for the harm they cause, they reflect on their pasts and heal through their poetry. The capacity for healing through poetry has motivated me as I moved through the process of writing my thesis and feeling like my work is a meaningful contribution, not only to literary studies, but to the world.

I found it much harder to feel like my work is meaningful once spring break rolled around. Instead of spending the week in coffee shops writing my thesis and hanging out with my friends, the country shut down in stages, leading to the news that I would spend the rest of my senior year in my parents’ home. I was concerned about the transition to online learning; however, I was more anxious about writing my thesis without my typical support systems. Writing a thesis is difficult enough. Writing a thesis in the middle of a global pandemic, as thousands are dying, is harder than I could have imagined. They say raising children takes a village; writing a thesis does as well. And my village was dispersed across the country, dissolved into the ether of digital communication.

Although my cohort was given the option of ending our progress at mid-semester, I, and many of my colleagues, chose to continue. We relied more heavily on each other, messaging each other encouragement and exchanging drafts for fresh eyes. And I’m glad to say, we survived. I survived. This was one of the hardest things I have ever done. It was also one of the most rewarding. I shed a tear or two of pride when I emailed the finished project to the English department.

I am endlessly proud of the project I produced and the work I put in. The final months of my thesis were not how I imagined them, but I did the best I could and it taught me a lot about surviving in a pandemic. The initial impact is intense. It is overwhelming and all-consuming. Some days, I can write an entire section. Most days, I need to just spend a little time reading some poetry in bed and letting it bounce around in my head. Every day, I need to accept where I am, be present, and work with what I have.