

Dear Friends of History,

As the calendar year draws to a close, I write with words of gratitude towards everyone in our community: to my **colleagues** in the faculty for their labors, their collegiality, the insightful books and articles they publish, and their will to do good; to our **staff** who work so hard to sustain our work; and not least, to our **students** (undergrads and grads) who push us to become better teachers, who challenge us to become finer scholars through the mutual learning we engage in both in and outside of the classroom, and whose presence amongst us helps us build the learning community that is the History department. Philosophers who have studied this structure of feeling called gratitude—and it is a universal, although expressed and valued differently across cultures and over time—tell us that among other things, it is a virtuous disposition which compels us to appreciate other people in our lives for acts performed, kindnesses demonstrated, and benefactions received. Not everyone, of course, regards gratitude in such a positive light. Some worry about a likely darker side as they ask: Must we be beholden to those who unintentionally confer a benefit, or who give us a benefit we don't desire? Does an expectation of gratitude—which might well impose a sense of debt and dependence—reproduce an oppressive, unjust, and unequal world? Even while recognizing such concerns, I tend to side with those who propose that heartfelt gratitude opens us up to deeper and more meaningful relationships with others with whom we share this complex world. The benefactor too stands to benefit from the forging of a relationship of care and mutuality.

Ever since I arrived in this country close to forty years ago as a young student from India to pursue my Ph. D., and then went on to become a teacher and a professor, I have received and experienced what I believe is the most important gift in the world for which I am eternally grateful—the gift of learning and of being part of a hospitable community of learning. To engage in acts of learning, which I truly believe is a lifelong commitment, is a profoundly transformative experience. I have learned over the decades as both student and teacher that to receive and participate in the gift of learning is to welcome the unwelcome, to grapple with inconvenient but necessary truths and difficult knowledge, and to recognize the limits of erudition, which is after all contingent. It is also a gift that has transported me to different worlds and introduced me to the radically new, the magical, and the wondrous. It has yielded some of the most joyous moments of my life. This gift has also revealed to me the importance of placing myself in a situation of shared vulnerability in which I am challenged, sometimes daily, about my ideas and convictions, even prejudices, compelling me to change, I hope, for the better. But above all the gift of learning fosters the web of mutuality that is created between us as we collectively engage in improving our own minds and also the world around us. For all these reasons and more, I thank everyone in the department for having enriched our community this past year and wish you a joyous holiday season.

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