



# Gratitude is My Attitude

Guest post by Maria Flora Mangano

This post was prompted by a gift I received in February from several alumni. They were MA students from Pakistan and Tunisia, who enrolled in my course on communication of scientific research in 2024 at the University of Viterbo - a town close to Rome where I live. At the end of the course, they invited me for dinner to express their gratitude. They told me they had experienced something deep and unique in class. They said that this four-day course, about twenty hours in total, was enough to change their perspective on many aspects of life. Their intention was to thank me using the traditional flavors, perfumes, and colors of their homelands, by inviting me into their home, specifically, the Pakistani students' flat. It took a while to organize this event, almost ten months in fact, yet the result was precious and unexpected. As a surprise, their gift seems to have waited for the right moment.

The Pakistani students welcomed me in traditional Punjabi dress, clothing for special occasions and feasts they said. They wore wonderful *hijabs* (the Muslim headscarf), as did the Tunisian student. Their flat mates, a couple of Pakistani PhD students, were also present, as well as one alumna's husband, who was a PhD student too. They were all Muslims, and they cooked the whole dinner following *halal* customs with Pakistani and Tunisian foods. Their delicious table offered us the opportunity to cross several intercultural and interreligious topics, from the traditional recipes to the geopolitical issues related to their home countries; we also discussed the Islamic rules for preparing food, and the common aspects of the three Abrahamic religions.

In addition, we talked about their future in research, as young scholars in the agricultural field, with multiple projects and dreams, including doctoral training (for the MA students) and post-doctoral fellowships (for the current PhD students) around the world. They shared being homesick, given that they chose to spend the whole period of the MA in Italy, without returning to their families. The Tunisian student was married, and she had left at home her five-year-old. None of them expects to return to their home country to earn a PhD or accept a post-doctoral fellowship, as they feel the need for more working experience, formal education, and training in agriculture before returning.

I brought to all of them symbolic gifts: the "seeds of dialogue" (Mangano, 2024a), seeds of fruits I usually prepare and give to the students at the end of my courses. The meaning is to wish to each of them to consider every meeting and relationship as an opportunity for planting a seed in the Other's heart. I gave seeds also to the three Pakistani doctoral students; they were touched to receive this gift, and one of them demonstrated her gratitude with a symbolic present. She had just

come back from her first pilgrimage to Makkah (Mecca), which all of them, as Muslims, wish to participate in at least once in their lives. In her silky colored *chador* (the Muslim veil covering the head and the body), she told us she had thought of everybody while at Makkah and Medina.

She gave me a little bag with different types of dates coming from Medina, much valued in the Muslim tradition. She told me they are related to the Prophet Muhammad, who considered dates the gift of God, and his favorite fruit, ideal for starting the *iftar*, the meal after the daily fast during Ramadan. The dates produced in Medina seem the best and serve as a precious souvenir from the *Hajj* (the pilgrimage to Makkah) for family, friends, and relatives. She included me in this list of friends and was pleased to connect with me soon after her return.

The Tunisian alumna had a further gift: she gave me a diary, with a lovely cover having the words: "Gratitude is my attitude." She explained to me that this phrase perfectly summarized her feeling of thankfulness towards my lectures and our exchanges, as well as the atmosphere shared in class, and the awareness she developed through her written and oral research.

I was touched by their unexpected expressions of gratitude, estimation, and care, nearly a year after the course ended; although a short experience, it left a special mark on them, as well as on me.

Student gratitude occurs in education but is primarily shown by either very young students or by young adults, although probably the latter is less common. I may say that I have had the privilege to experience students' thankfulness quite often, regardless of their age. Either from children and their families, as I recently described (Mangano, 2024b), or with young adults, as in the courses to doctoral students, the feeling is probably the same. It is a surprising gift, which fills the heart, sparking wonder and gratitude. It encourages hope and trust, and it may offer the opportunity to think, also to rethink, about our role as educators. Working with students can be more than a job; it may become a life choice, an answer to a call, which we choose every day. It may turn into an attitude, a perspective on reality, a vision of the world centered on the Other rather than on us. This approach may also change our relationship to our students, and, far more broadly, with our daily lives.

While the Tunisian student was intending to express her gratitude to me, I realized that her words were true also for my life, as they summarized my daily experience with the Other. Thankfulness may become mutual, as it is focused on our approach to the Other.

If we can shift the center of gravity from ourselves to the Other, we may experience gratitude as a pure feeling which does not depend on us, thus on our abilities, successes, or results. It reminded me of the *I-Thou* relationship as theorized by Martin Buber (1937), thus, the basic idea that the relationship lies in the between, perhaps in the hyphen between, the *I* and the *Thou* (Mangano, 2018, p. 27). It is a space which depends neither on the *I*, nor on the *Thou*; it is in the middle, in the between, in the "space of us."

When we are able to decenter ourselves and put the Other at the center of the scene, we may also see what already exists, rather than what is missing. We may experience wonder, as we do not expect a gift: the Other may already be a gift, and we do not need any additional expectation. This

approach, that of an unexpected surprise, may provide a new perspective on reality as a glass half-full; sometimes even completely full. In this attitude, gratitude sounds likely to be close to hope, an endless source of water although just a few drops may be enough, as they can guarantee the strength to carry on.

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