

Exploring gratitude in the United States



So I spent most of Thanksgiving this year at an airport. Not my first choice, but given the available options, it was probably best. And I'm grateful because I had a new awareness of all the people who spend time traveling. There are, of course, the pilots and plane staff and other airline officials, but there are also the people staffing every Hudson newsstand that doesn't close down for the day, and everything in the food court – you get the idea. If you were missing out on turkey, one sandwich place had a close substitute, and I eyed caramel pecan popcorn for dessert at O'Hare in Chicago, but a lot of it seemed quite unnecessary and unfortunate – as grateful as I was for the Uber driver and everyone else who made getting from Chicago to New York on Thanksgiving possible.

I'm also grateful because my Thanksgiving traveling had to do with my annual fall gratitude tour. The National Review Institute has programs in multiple cities that teach foundations of conservatism over the course of eight weeks. There are readings and speakers and conversation leaders. For six years now, in November, I go to San Francisco, Dallas and now Chicago to talk about gratitude for the closing session. Because it is the last one – and because of the time of year, too – I always find an extremely receptive audience to the theme.

There are some mandatory readings, all from National Review founder William F. Buckley Jr. And I've had some recommended supplementary readings touching on religious persecution and faith and forgiveness, Pope Francis and *Laudato Si'*, and an excerpt from G.K. Chesterton. It's always interesting to see what strikes people. We do this in the spring, too, in New

York, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia, too, and I remember one military veteran being especially moved by the witness of the families of the Coptic Christian martyrs who were killed by ISIS in Libya a few years ago. You could tell it was a balm to his soul, and a challenge about so many things, as any discussion of gratitude really should be.

I also get a kick out of how the people in the different cities have such unique experiences and perspectives, including in their interactions with the text. For instance, in Dallas, people bring up God almost immediately. In San Francisco, not so much. But in the latter, you do have gratitude for the fact that believing in God doesn't make you feel like an outcast in our National Review Institute groups. In Chicago, a number of our groups had other conservative networks in their lives, so they were a little more "eggheady" in this, our first year there. I'll be curious if I notice a similar dynamic next year.

There was also a clear contrast between San Francisco and Dallas in terms of their experience of freedom. In Dallas, people were tripping over themselves to express their gratitude for it, for living in the greatest country in the world. In San Francisco, people were keenly aware of the dangers of letting their views be known in the workplace and elsewhere. There and in Chicago, too, people expressed how they would never list their credentials as a National Review Institute Regional Fellow, for fear of what a potential employer might think.

I am tremendously grateful to meet all of these people – some of whom have been reading NR, me or are fellow William F. Buckley Jr. fans from way back. This Chicago session even included a classmate I haven't seen since my undergraduate days at The Catholic University of America. That was a treat. And I'm grateful for the legacy of William F. Buckley, which we're able to promote not as nostalgia but to move forward with a worldview of humility that appreciates that all good

things are gifts from God. And even in struggle and confusion and adversity, this remains true and we have something wonderful to work with and build on.

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