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# Thanking and Being Thanked

Mary Whisner

*University of Washington School of Law*, [whisner@uw.edu](mailto:whisner@uw.edu)

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## Thanking and Being Thanked\*

Mary Whisner\*\*

*Ms. Whisner contemplates the process of expressing and receiving appreciation for favors and assistance provided by librarians, and considers when giving thanks publicly is appropriate.*

¶1 When friends do you favors or give you gifts, you generally thank them. Not only is it socially expected, but you really do want to let them know that you appreciate what they have done. And when you are the generous one, doing favors or giving gifts, you like your friends to thank you. It feels good to hear that they recognize and appreciate your thoughtfulness: you are pleased to have pleased them. We participate in these exchanges all the time, thanking and being thanked for assistance as slight as passing the salt or as substantial as tending the sick, fixing a roof, or giving someone a car.

¶2 Being involved in a commercial transaction doesn't shut out the impulse to thank or the pleasure of being thanked. For example, when I get my hair cut, I thank the stylist, even though he is just doing his job, for which I am paying. He thanks me for coming in, even though we both know I am coming in for my own benefit, not his. The thanks—and the small talk we engage in—help make the interaction seem friendly and warm.

¶3 Librarianship may not be as intimate as hair styling,<sup>1</sup> but it still involves relationships—relationships that can be made smoother with thanks and small talk. The relationship between reference librarian and patron is also not directly “pay to play.” The connection between transaction and payment is attenuated, on both sides. The students' tuition and the taxpayers' taxes pay my salary, but they don't have to pull out their wallets to ask a question. For my part, I know that I'm paid to do what I do, but the nexus between any reference service and the uptick in my checking account balance on payday is not at the top of my mind. Perhaps

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\*\* Reference Librarian, Marian Gould Gallagher Law Library, University of Washington School of Law, Seattle, Washington.

1. There might be some intimate moments, as when a patron shares (perhaps too much) about a divorce or messy family situation. But we don't have our hands in their hair.

because they aren't the ones directly paying us, some patrons couch reference requests in social terms: "Could I ask you a favor?" But when the "favor" is showing them where *A.L.R. 6th* is or finding committee reports for a public law, it's not a favor at all, but squarely within my job description.<sup>2</sup>

¶4 For my part, I have a warm feeling toward many of the people I serve, particularly the students and faculty whom I get to know over time. When I come across an item related to a professor's research interests and send a note, it feels very much like when I send a similar note to a friend or post a link on Facebook. At its most basic, I saw something to share and I shared it. The difference is that keeping track of faculty interests is part of my job, while thinking about my friends is not. When I've retired, I'll probably still have friendly feelings toward many faculty members and might continue to see some socially—but I won't make it a point to keep up with who's teaching professional responsibility and who's writing about advertising or the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act.<sup>3</sup>

¶5 Thanking practices vary. I have been told that French people do not thank store clerks and waiters as much as Americans do. To the French, thanking a clerk for handing you your change would imply that you didn't expect her to do her job correctly; the same goes for thanking a waiter for bringing you your coffee and croissant.<sup>4</sup> Even in our culture of easy thanks, it would be possible to overdo it to the point of insult. I assume that my stylist likes it when I thank him for a good cut, but he would be offended if I thanked him profusely for not cutting my ear. (Why would I think he'd be so unskilled?)

¶6 We reference librarians are often thanked. Patrons who come to the desk frequently say "thanks" on their way out. These quick remarks are polite, but don't necessarily indicate much depth of appreciation.<sup>5</sup> (For our part, we probably have not done much to earn deep appreciation.) It is more meaningful when a researcher who has spent a few hours in the library stops by and expresses thanks: "Thank you for your help today. The sources you showed me were just what I needed." A thank you may even reach us from someone we haven't helped directly, as in this story from a prison librarian: "As I unlocked the library door to let my clerks in, an inmate I've never seen before walked up and said, 'I just want to tell you, I have had nothing but good reports on how you're running the library. Thank you.' He then walked away."<sup>6</sup>

2. Sometimes it's "Can I bother you?" or "Am I interrupting?" They might indeed be bothering us or interrupting us, but if we're on duty in the reference office, our job is to welcome them: "It's true I'm working on something else, but that's just because I was waiting for someone like you to come ask me a question. Come on in!"

3. There are occasions when I send an item to both faculty and friends. A new case, a blog post, or a news story could very well interest both faculty at my school and my friends who practice law, teach elsewhere, or are simply well-read, interested people. I'm paid to help the former stay current but not the latter—but it's very easy to send one message to a mix of them.

4. This difference is one I believe I heard voiced during a June 2012 conversation with an American I know who lives in Paris.

5. "[A]pologies and thanks are used not only as expressions of [the speaker's] psychological state for regret or gratitude but also as customary speech acts, devoid of any genuine feelings of regret or gratitude." Hye Eun Lee & Hee Sun Park, *Why Koreans Are More Likely to Favor "Apology," While Americans Are More Likely to Favor "Thank You,"* 37 HUM. COMM. RES. 125, 127 (2011).

6. Brian L. Baker, Facebook status update, July 18, 2013 (on file with author) (quoted with permission).

¶7 When patrons give us more than a perfunctory “thanks,” I believe they mean more than, “Thank you for answering my question (which I’d expect, because I know it’s your job).” I think they mean something along the lines of, “Thank you for answering my question (which I’d expect) in a creative, thorough, speedy manner (which is a bonus).” I base this in part on my own feelings when I express thanks to someone at work. For example, when I thank our computer specialist for fixing my PC or showing me how to do something that has stumped me, I mean something like, “I know it’s your job, but I still appreciate that you came through for me and helped me do my job. I’m glad you were good-natured about it, too.”

¶8 Thank yous are unevenly distributed, in many ways. One librarian offering equally good service day after day might experience a shower of thanks or a dry spell with no expressions of appreciation. And within the library, some positions are more likely to receive thanks than others—just as some staff positions in restaurants get more tips than others. If diners enjoy their meal and the service, they give a nice tip to the server, not the dishwasher who cleaned the cutlery or the sous-chef who chopped the vegetables—let alone the people outside the restaurant whose efforts contributed to the experience, such as the laundry worker who starched the tablecloth and the baker who made the bread. Why? Because the server is the one they interact with the most. In our information restaurants (i.e., libraries), we reference librarians couldn’t serve up the information we do without the staff who select, order, process, shelve, and check out the material, but we’re the ones who talk to the patrons, so we get the thanks. Some restaurants have a system in which the servers pool their tips and give a cut to bussers, dishwashers, and others. We might follow their lead and pay forward the appreciation we get by showing appreciation to our colleagues and coworkers.

¶9 Our most challenging work is generally for faculty and staff. Not only do they ask tough questions, but we go much further in helping them. A student or member of the public will be told some good sources to try and left to sort through them alone. But a professor’s question will get a librarian’s full attention, and the professor will receive a bibliography, a stack of printouts, a set of downloaded articles, or whatever she requested. Some of these questions are fun because the topics are interesting and they call for creativity and perseverance. Others are equally challenging but not as much fun. *C’est la vie*.

¶10 Faculty responses to our work also fall along a continuum, with silence at one end and effusive praise and even gifts at the other, and the strength of the thanks is not always proportionate to the challenge of the assignment. If we receive profuse thanks for minimal effort, perhaps it is because the professor highly values the information, regardless of how hard we had to look for it. And if we don’t hear anything after we send the results of a project that required a lot of heavy lifting (figuratively speaking), maybe it’s because the professor didn’t realize how much work it would be, was confident we’d be able to find it, or just didn’t think to reply “Thanks! Got it!” Once, after we *Bluebooked* several papers for a symposium a professor organized, she gave us flowers for the reference office. The gesture let us know that she knew we’d done something extra for her (and that it was a somewhat tedious task, at that). This summer another professor bought us lunch in gratitude for the research we did for him as he worked on a Supreme Court brief. Even better

than the free lunch was the hour he spent with us discussing the brief and how he used our research.

¶11 All of the above examples have been private, or at most between the patron and the department. There are also public declarations. It is always nice to get a shout-out for reference and other library services during a professor's endowed lectureship or at the annual law review banquet. And, of course, there are the thanks in footnotes and book reviews. As always, it feels good to be appreciated. The public and permanent expression can be good for the department and the library. We always include these acknowledgments in our department's annual report. Our director can have them handy the day the dean asks (in effect): "What has the library done lately for the productivity of the faculty and the prestige of the law school?"<sup>7</sup> Those footnotes can be helpful to individual librarians as well, particularly less senior ones facing promotion review who need to build their files.<sup>8</sup> The footnotes also serve to market library services whenever other professors see them.

¶12 We can give as well as receive thanks in footnotes. When we publish, we can thank the people who helped us—but who, how many, and how lavishly? Proportionality is desirable. It's common to have two or more pages of acknowledgments in a book,<sup>9</sup> but not in a law review article. It's probably more appropriate to thank the colleague who read and commented on a draft than the one who picked up a coffee for you when she was at Starbucks. Both acts helped you with your writing, but the editing took more effort and expertise—and presumably made a bigger difference.

¶13 Arthur Austin has observed that, since the great majority of law journals are edited by law students, not faculty, the practice of thanking many prominent scholars in an author's note could be seen as a substitute for peer review: the student editors considering the article for publication would be more inclined to think it was good if it had been read (and presumably approved) by the experts.<sup>10</sup> And readers of the published article, despite knowing that it was only edited by law students, might feel reassured that *some* experts had seen it. Austin concludes, though, that the practice does more harm than good: it is self-serving and ethically doubtful, and it can mislead or pressure editors.<sup>11</sup> One should circulate one's drafts, but not use the author's note for name-dropping: "Private vetting by knowledgeable colleagues," Austin writes, "is still the honorable tradition."<sup>12</sup>

7. The acknowledgments won't be the only evidence she has, of course—the library does a lot more than what is reflected in authors' footnotes.

8. For the same reason, a mention in a footnote can be helpful to a research assistant who wants to show potential employers that his work was valued.

9. For a few examples, see Mary Whisner, *Writing Buddies*, 103 LAW LIBR. J. 677, 2011 LAW LIBR. J. 40.

10. Arthur D. Austin, *The "Custom of Vetting" as a Substitute for Peer Review*, 32 ARIZ. L. REV. 1, 5 (1990).

11. *Id.* at 7.

12. *Id.* at 8. In a later article, Austin remarks that author's notes are seldom checked. Did all the people listed really review the article? Are they willing to have their names associated with it? Arthur Austin, *Footnote Skulduggery and Other Bad Habits*, 44 U. MIAMI L. REV. 1009, 1023–24 (1990). In response to Austin's critique, two authors made clear that they added their footnote thanking friends and colleagues only after their article was accepted for publication. Ronald K.L. Collins & David M. Skover, *Paratexts*, 44 STAN. L. REV. 509, 509 n.† (1992).

¶14 The problem with only conveying gratitude privately is that it obviates some of the benefits discussed above. Just as being thanked publicly by faculty is good for librarians and libraries, it can be good for people who help authors in other ways. If Established Scholar A says in a footnote that Visiting Assistant Professor B offered insightful comments about Topic X, that might help B get invited to participate in a symposium on X. In contrast, if I were to thank, say, Erwin Chemerinsky and Kathleen Sullivan for their help with my writing, it would not do a bit to improve their reputations as constitutional law scholars; if anything could burnish their reputations, it wouldn't be a word from me.<sup>13</sup> But if I thanked a librarian who is smart and thoughtful but not well known in the profession, it might be of help. Thanking the person who offered the writing opportunity, carefully critiqued several drafts, or helped the author place a piece is a sign of gratitude and respect for the assistance. Moreover, librarians and faculty who are going up for promotion sometimes need to demonstrate their service and involvement in the profession—both of which can be supported by acknowledgments in footnotes.

¶15 A sincere “thank you” can reinforce the relationship between the thanked and the thanker. The reverse is also true: failing to thank someone can damage the relationship. How much damage is done depends on the relationship, the individuals involved, and the size of the favor. I know someone who put a lot of effort into reviewing a younger scholar's work and was very disappointed at the lack of acknowledgment. The reviewer will be much less likely to lend a hand to the junior person in the future. On the other hand, I know that I have (regrettably) forgotten or neglected to thank a friend for a gift or a favor and yet had the friendship endure. A professional relationship in its early stages might need more careful tending than a friendship that has been forged over the course of many conversations, experiences, gifts, and favors.

¶16 In some contexts, “favors” or “gifts” become items of exchange. The recipient understands that the giver expects something in return. One study explored this dynamic, finding that gratitude diminished as indebtedness increased.<sup>14</sup> The authors found

a curious paradox of giving and gratitude. If gifts are given for the purpose of receiving return favours from the beneficiary, the beneficiary is less likely to feel grateful, and is less likely to feel like returning the favour. The more a benefit is received as a gift of grace, the more likely there will be a return of gratitude.<sup>15</sup>

¶17 Thanking has costs as well. Psychologists note that expressing thanks can threaten one's self-image by reducing one's credit for an achievement. “Thanking

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13. This is purely hypothetical. To the best of my knowledge, neither one of them has ever laid eyes on anything I've written.

14. As is often the case with psychology experiments, the subjects were undergraduates faced with hypothetical scenarios—one in which a classmate helped the student move (with, alternatively, no expectations, expectations of thanks, or expectations of help with the classmate's own move) and one in which a classmate shared notes (again, with different expectations). The authors use this quotation from Jean Jacques Rousseau as an epigraph: “Gratitude is a duty which ought to be paid, but which none have a right to expect.” Philip C. Watkins et al., *The Debt of Gratitude: Dissociating Gratitude and Indebtedness*, 20 COGNITION & EMOTION 217, 217 (2006).

15. *Id.* at 236.

others . . . contradicts the self-serving bias, as does any admission that one received help.”<sup>16</sup> Balancing this are “[n]orms of modesty and of credit sharing, as well as past experiences of being subjected to others’ anger for failing to express gratitude”<sup>17</sup>—and so people often do express thanks. The risk of seeming to be an ineffectual person who needs help can be offset by the bonus of seeming like a gracious person who is sensitive to others’ contributions.

¶18 In addition to asking whether footnote acknowledgments are expected, useful, or helpful, we might ask: Does anyone want to read that stuff? I can speak for myself: I do, within limits. In books, I enjoy getting a peek at the author’s process—what libraries he used, what writers’ colony she stayed at, who advised and helped and prodded. And in articles, I’m often happy to see the acknowledgment of the reviewers, research assistants, and (of course) librarians. If the author wants to thank a dog<sup>18</sup> or a cat, I’m happy to see that flash of personality.<sup>19</sup>

¶19 We receive thanks and we give thanks because we work among people. What we do is part of a social fabric as well as a way to support ourselves. Appreciate the thanks you get and remember to give thanks to others. Thank you very much for reading this.

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16. Roy F. Baumeister & Stacey A. Ilko, *Shallow Gratitude: Public and Private Acknowledgement of External Help in Accounts of Success*, 16 BASIC & APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 191, 191 (1995).

17. *Id.* at 195. Baumeister and Ilko found that undergraduates asked to write about a success in their lives acknowledged help they received from others much more often when they believed that their statements would be read and discussed in a group. *Id.* at 201.

18. See, e.g., Austin, *supra* note 12, at 1010 n.2 (thanking a Saint Bernard named Colonel Mosby).

19. For a wonderful send-up of authors’ acknowledgments, see H.F. Ellis, *Without Whose Unfailing Encouragement*, NEW YORKER, Aug. 23, 1969, at 24, reprinted in DISQUIET PLEASE: MORE HUMOR WRITING FROM *THE NEW YORKER* 163 (David Remnick & Henry Finder eds., 2008).