

Thomas Cherry, M.A. English, Literature, 2014

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“Pay attention. I think paying attention to all of life, from class to football games to eating in the cafeteria, is so essential to making your time in school worth it. Whenever I waited in long lines or listened to people talk, even in the classes I hated, I wanted to make my time worth something and I did that by paying attention and trying to find whatever would be impactful and useful to me – it was always there somewhere.”

With two enthusiastic Western Kentucky alumni as parents, Thomas Cherry wanted to come to the place they had credited as being so impactful on their lives when it came time to choose a college. After completing his undergraduate studies, Cherry graduated with his MA in literature in 2014.

When asked how he felt the day he graduated, Cherry was more focused on his parents’ reaction than on his own feelings. “I was happy for my parents. Graduation was a checkpoint in a longer plan for me, but I was thrilled to see my parent’s hard work and sacrifices paying off.”

Cherry is currently continuing his academic studies at the University of Cincinnati, where he is a graduate assistant and PhD student in literature and cultural studies. While he finds that he is making use daily of his degree in his continued studies, he also added a little humor to his current status. “It is a continuation of my attempt to stave off entering the ‘real world’ in the vague hope of becoming a real scholar one day. It’s easy to joke about this, of course, but I absolutely am using many of the things I learned at WKU in my postgraduate work now. My time spent learning to read well and think in critical and creative ways has been invaluable in navigating the high-level academic world I’m in now.”

Cherry tried to take away something from each of his professors during his time at WKU. He learned examples of what he feels works well in a classroom and also what he

would prefer not to do as a professor himself. Dr. Berry and Dr. Rigby both showed Cherry the more human side of the academic world, while Dr. Davies played a key role in assisting Cherry when he struggled to write effectively. Cherry also noted Dr. Langsdon as one that always made him want to give his very best effort.

For students currently enrolled at WKU, and even future students, Cherry offered an outstanding example of making a personal decision to truly put forth the work that would help elevate him as a student. "When I think about the things that taught me the most, I immediately think of an email I got from Wes Berry after I asked for a paper extension. He was gracious in allowing me the time, but also made me understand the weight of the request and how I could and should be better than needing it. He probably didn't intend for this to impact me as much as it did, but that was a moment that has motivated me a great deal even today. I stayed up all night and finished the paper by the original deadline, by the way."

Cherry also acknowledges his ability for critical thinking has helped to make sense of the world today, even though as a graduate student he doesn't find time for much life outside of academic studies. "I've been given the necessary tools, through reading and writing critically, to take in all the lunacy, attempt to understand it, and ultimately work through it in useful ways."

With literary elegance, Cherry gave one final thought in the mention of an epitaph: "John Keats's grave doesn't have his name on it, but instead said 'Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.' I don't know of a more beautiful phrase or idea that has ever stuck with me more."

