

UMHB students learn about Forgiving Day tradition

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BELTON—Students quarrel. Feelings get hurt. Relationships break. It happens every day on every college campus—even a Christian one.

Almost 150 years ago at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor, Anne Luther, the president's wife, devised a plan to help end the festering feuds and help heal broken relationships among the all-woman student body. Thus began a since-forgotten tradition she called "Forgiving Day."

The idea came to Luther just before Thanksgiving in 1878. Determined to promote peace before their holiday feast, she and student Elli Moore Townsend tasked faculty and staff to mediate between squabbling students to get them to bury their differences and start anew.



They believed one couldn't truly be thankful during Thanksgiving without first reconciling their grievances, said Beth Norvell, associate director of museum and alumni engagement.

Then, on Thanksgiving Day, as a symbol of reconciliation, each girl had to present a "token of forgiveness" in the form of a hug, handshake, note or word of kindness to any other students with whom she had a grievance. They did this with Luther as witness.

Many girls saw this tradition as challenging and uncomfortable, but as one student said, "We would do anything for Mrs. Luther."



UMHB Associate Director of Museum and Alumni Engagement Beth Norvell shares an excerpt from one of Elli Moore Townsend's Thanksgiving letters to the Cottage Home girls. (Photo by Hannah Van Veusekom / University of Mary Hardin-Baylor)

Perhaps the Forgiving Day idea formed from Luther's own grievances from a life filled with ups and downs. But even in bad times, the lessons she learned are a testament of a woman of great faith and forgiveness, which Norvell believes contributed to Luther putting so much stock in teaching the virtues of forgiveness to her students.

One such instance happened after the death of Luther's first child—the first of four who died during her lifetime. According to her memoirs, she went into a heavy depression.

"She gave the Lord a timeline and said, 'Lord, I will lean into this, and I will trust you even though I don't feel like it,'" Norvell recounted from the memoir.

Luther gave God a specific amount of time to heal her grief and by the end of that time, her heart was still broken, and she was devastated.

"Soon after, however, Anne's heart was flooded with peace and joy, and she

never gave the Lord a timeline on healing after that,” Norvell said. “It was pivotal for her.”

Forgiveness and Thanksgiving

Norvell saw the season before Thanksgiving last year as an opportune time to create an exhibit at UMHB to share the history of the tradition with students.



A “Forgiving Day” exhibit was set up at the Bawcom Student Union at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor to mark a forgotten campus tradition. (Photo by Hannah Van Veusekom / University of Mary Hardin-Baylor)

When Danielle Kenne spotted Elli Moore Townsend’s letter in the display, she was intrigued.

“I was very curious as to what the story behind the forgotten tradition was and was touched by its contents,” said Kenne, a senior health science pre-occupational therapy major. “I love UMHB history and traditions. So, I was super excited to learn about an old tradition I’d never heard of before. It’s such a touching tradition.”

Forgiving others is essential, she said, and learning about the forgotten day caused her to think about Thanksgiving in a new light.

“I love the concept of intentionally forgiving people right before Thanksgiving, so you can be thankful with a grateful and unburdened heart,” Kenne said. “I never really considered how forgiving others could affect my ability to be truly thankful, and it made me want to spend time in prayer about forgiveness before Thanksgiving.”

Like most everyone, Kenne said she sometimes struggles with forgiveness but tries to remind herself that we are supposed to forgive because the Lord first forgave us.

“I’ve slowly learned that forgiving others is necessary for my own heart, so that I can be in a steadfast relationship with the Lord.”

Every day is a good day to practice forgiveness

She said she would love to see the old tradition revived at UMHB one day: “It’s often forgotten by most college students, especially with the chaos of the end of the semester.”

For the Christian, UMHB Chaplain Jason Palmer describes forgiveness as “a response to the love Jesus demonstrated in which he willingly set aside his right to prioritize justice for the wrongs we had done and, instead, decided to relentlessly pursue relationship with us.”

Anne Luther’s Forgiving Day tradition continued off and on for years but slowly faded into obscurity after students began going home for Thanksgiving.

But, as Palmer points out, “Every day is a good day to practice

forgiveness.”

“Focusing on forgiveness helps us keep our perspective fixed on things of eternal significance while setting conditions for the mending of hearts—both ours and those of others. Colossians 3:13 is a favorite verse of mine regarding forgiveness because I’m reminded that the Lord has already set the example that he is asking me to follow.”