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In August of 2009, I sat for my qualifying exams in religion, psychology, and culture at Vanderbilt University. I can honestly say that this experience fulfilled many of the predictions that other post-exam students shared with me: it was an extremely stressful period; there were days when I felt completely overwhelmed; and it was one of the most daunting academic tasks I have ever undertaken. All of these things were true — and yet, focusing only on these aspects of qualifying exams can cause us as graduate students to miss the benefits of this intensive process.

Now don't get me wrong — while I was studying, I really wondered whether this practice makes the most pedagogical sense for graduate students in our field. After all, most of us take very few, if any, exams during the entire span of our coursework. Many of our professors seem to think that at this level of study, writing papers is more useful than taking exams. But then, when it comes time to prove ourselves as fledgling scholars, we are asked to do so in a completely different format than that to which we are accustomed. This seems quite counterintuitive, and thus begs the question: why has this approach to qualifying examinations persisted for so long?

I'm sure that the answer to this question is complex, and I do not pretend to understand all its nuances. However, as I have reflected on my own process I have made some guesses as to why qualifying exams are still administered in religious studies. First of all, preparing for exams helps us to see the "big picture" of our respective disciplines. At the end of my exam period, I had a much more solid grasp of my area of study, and of how that area of study fits within the wider arena of religious studies in general. I also gained important insights into how different

authors within my subdiscipline relate to one another, and how those writers have helped to shape the field over time. I even found that when I reread texts I had originally encountered in coursework, I understood them better, and I was able to put them into new conversations with other key resources.

I noted that the qualifying exam process does not just require us to synthesize large chunks of material — it also demands that we do so in a significant way. Most of my exam questions asked me to show why and how particular concepts matter — to my own research, to my clinical practice, and to the field as a whole. In other words, my examiners did not simply request that I demonstrate knowledge of individual pieces of information, but that I articulate how I use those resources to make constructive contributions to academic conversations. They asked me to prove my command of the material as a means to a greater goal; namely, claiming my unique voice as an aspiring scholar in my discipline.

Finally, qualifying exams force us to learn to think on our feet. Although different programs administer their tests differently, most impose a strict time limit for completing exams. This means that we must move from thinking to synthesizing to writing in a relatively short period of time. Admittedly, for many students this kind of time crunch creates lots of anxiety. But as I have thought more about my own examination process, I have realized that this skill could prove useful in many academic situations. Indeed, the ability to think on our feet is crucial for much of what we will have to do as professionals — whether it's deciding how to respond to an agitated student in class, replying to a critique from a colleague at a conference, or participating in a heated debate in a faculty meeting. In academia, as in all of life, we don't always have time to think through every aspect of a situation before deciding how to respond. Sometimes we have to act quickly, and in some small way taking qualifying exams can help us develop our capacity to do that.

I realize that my words may provide little comfort to students in the throes of exam study. To them, these reflections may suggest that I am looking at an extremely taxing, and even terrifying, process through rose-colored glasses. I admit that this may be the kind of article that can only be written “from the other side,” by someone who already knows she has passed her exams. But I hope that by reading this, some students will gain a broader perspective on what they are doing and why. Maybe this will give them the strength they need to push through the most difficult days, and to keep on going. In the end, we all have to take qualifying exams whether we want to or not. I'm suggesting that if we look for the benefits of the process while we are still in it, our exams may become just a little less daunting, and just a little more manageable.