

A Forum on Zena Hitz's *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*

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At a time when reading and the liberal arts seem increasingly undervalued, Zena Hitz's book, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*, makes a case for both. Hitz's book has received significant attention and praise. First published in 2020, reprinted in paperback in 2021, *Lost in Thought* became a nonfiction philosophical and academic bestseller, with translations underway in Arabic, Catalan, Japanese, Spanish, Turkish, and Vietnamese.

Why has Hitz's book captivated readers? *Zeal's* focus on the liberal arts offers an ideal platform to explore that question. While Hitz defines her subject broadly as "the intellectual life," she builds her argument by recounting her own unique journey shaped by the liberal arts. Hitz attended St. John's College, a liberal arts college in the "Great Books" tradition, with less than 500 students at each of its two campuses (Annapolis and Santa Fe), and she teaches at the Annapolis campus now. In between those two bookends of experience with the liberal arts, Hitz completed graduate studies in philosophy at top research universities (Cambridge, University of Chicago, and Princeton), began teaching philosophy at large research universities (Auburn University and University of Maryland), and also pursued her own quest for meaning. Hitz participated in community service, converted to Catholicism, and lived within a lay Catholic religious community in Canada before making the decision to return to St. John's. Since her journey weaves through the liberal arts, philosophy, and theology (because of her interest in religious life and thought), this forum gathers scholars from each of these three different perspectives to reflect upon Hitz's book.

First, Joanna Zattiero, academic musicologist, writes from many years of teaching experience in music, creative arts, and history. Zattiero affirms Hitz's critique of oversized classes and the ways that academic life can become distorted by ego and competition. She describes how the joys of working with diverse students can evaporate as institutional support for the liberal arts (and perhaps especially the arts) decreases.

Second, Gadi Charles Weber, scholar of medieval Jewish philosophy, zeroes in on Hitz's argument for learning in community. While Hitz's argument reflects Aristotle's analysis of the good life, which was drawn into the

Christian tradition by medieval thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, Weber turns to the central medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, also called the Rambam), who brought the thought of Aristotle into dialogue with Judaism. Comparing Hitz's argument with Maimonides, Weber draws attention to the value of "person-to-person" learning in Hitz's book.

Third, Hai-Duong Nguyen, theologian, focuses on Hitz's description of the intellectual life as a withdrawal from the world, though not as a path to become more solitary, but as a path to communion. Nguyen describes finding a call to the intellectual life that meant leaving her life as a religious sister. While Hitz identifies such a life as a kind of voluntary poverty, Nguyen complicates this call with attention to the reality of involuntary poverty and how much it limits the intellectual life.

Hitz's book makes a case for the value of the intellectual life as a good in itself, with a narrative style that blends her argument with reflections on favorite texts and life events in her own journey. Hitz's approach can be read as a warm invitation to readers to reflect on their own intellectual journeys, affirming the way ordinary living mixes with the quest for understanding. The three reviews collected here agree that the best experiences of learning build community as they explore Hitz's interwoven themes of the liberal arts, philosophy, and religion.

While Hitz praises the "uselessness" of the intellectual life, she is sharply critical of involving the intellectual life in "the active life," warning of potentially "corrosive forms of activism."¹ Hitz proposes that the founder of the Catholic Worker movement, Dorothy Day, is the model example of someone who reads seriously and tried to live out what she read.² Day lived out an ethics of personal witness—she did not attempt to change unjust systems. I tried and failed to find a fourth reviewer to address this issue. I asked scholars who had turned from academic life to a life of activism. They turned me down, too committed to their active work of service to have time for an academic book forum. Perhaps my failed effort to find an activist reviewer supports Hitz's point.

Hitz seems to end her book with two choices, either the good choice of the intellectual life as she has described it, or the bad choice of "opinionized universities," institutions that teach only the opinion of others while reducing learning to "social and political results."³ I have considered the author a close friend since we met as students at St. John's, and so I acknowledge my potential biases and will not attempt to be that fourth reviewer. Like the reviews collected here, I too appreciate Hitz's lively defense of the search for understanding, especially as it affirms the good of a liberal arts education. I am not yet convinced by—or perhaps do not fully

understand—Hitz’s concluding description of the dangers to avoid, especially her criticism of institutions that claim to teach knowledge but instead present merely opinion.

The three reviews presented here all respond to Hitz’s argument with lively appreciation, connecting to her argument about serious encounters with texts, the need for both solitude and community in serious study, and the way poorly run institutions and scholars focused on their own success can reduce the joys of the search for knowledge. The lively dialogue fostered here is one source for hope and also an opportunity to think further about how individuals and structures of power can support or distort the human search to understand and to flourish together.

¹ Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton University Press, 2021), 163–64.

² Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 175–76.

³ Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 192.