

Response to *Lost in Thought:  
The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*  
from a Semi-Recovering Academic Musicologist

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**Z**ena Hitz's book, focusing on the central idea that learning simply for the sake of learning has deep inherent worth as a common human endeavor, is an invitation to reconsider how we as readers and also society as a whole view inquiry, the pursuit of knowledge, and the desire—even the need—for intellectual activity. Various referred to as an “inner life,” “intellectual life,” and “the hidden life of learning,” the focus on learning as a core human value as well as an escape from the grinding rat race of the modern world is clearly articulated and well-supported with examples from Socrates to Primo Levi and Malcolm X, among many others. Hitz considers the intellectual life both available and important to all people regardless of their education or socio-economic status and suggests that, similar to Gramsci's idea of the organic intellectual, many people experience learning in this sense without being fully aware of it, especially those learning in contexts outside of traditional academia.<sup>1</sup>

Having grown up in a family of non-conventional scholars whose love of learning and discussion influenced nearly every part of their lives, Hitz appears to have developed an interest in the intellectual life from a young age. Her experiences as a liberal arts student, time spent teaching at several different well-known academic institutions, and purposeful engagement with various communities outside of academia all feature prominently in the book, lending valuable perspective to the discussion of how society values teaching and learning. Without her experience from both within and outside of institutional academia, Hitz's arguments would be less persuasive, more akin to the many valid cries for increased support of liberal arts education and critical thinking from those whose experiences are limited to their lives within the academy. These perspectives are important yet often harder to appreciate by those who exist outside of traditional academic circles. In contrast, Hitz draws from a broader set of experiences that more people may find relatable and which carry their own intrinsic value through service to others and a larger community.

As an academic musicologist with many years of adjunct teaching experience in music, creative arts, and history, I found many similarities

between the author's experiences and my own. After years of reveling in the challenges of deep learning and the exhilaration of academic discourse, I too began to experience a fear of failure that has become part of the social hierarchy of the academic world. The "public acts of competitive humiliation" that Hitz mentions seemed at first to be part of the exciting nature of academic pursuit but soon lost their luster as I realized that those who would cut down the intellectual work of others to inflate their own egos were effectively doing the opposite of supporting lives of inquiry and the love of learning. Instead, those who thrill in the academic takedown set examples for the selective destruction of this deeply human pursuit and dismantle lives of inquiry in what can be deep and lasting ways.<sup>2</sup> No one benefits from this misguided approach to academic or intellectual discourse, least of all students and contingent faculty.

Similarly, I experienced the undermining of liberal arts education firsthand as my course sizes grew larger and larger, sometimes with 600 or more students per semester, on an adjunct salary that barely covered the cost of on-campus childcare. I deeply loved engaging with my classes, finding new ways to present course material that were accessible and relevant to my diverse students, and developing an ever-greater relationship with teaching and learning, but I eventually struggled to balance my commitment to high-quality education with the futile circularity of doubled teaching loads, meeting basic living expenses, and the need for time and headspace outside of the crushing grind of course development, teaching and mentoring, research, and grant writing with little to no institutional support. I was, as Hitz cautions against, working to earn enough money to pay my bills so that I could, in turn, work to earn money, *ad infinitum*. While I worked hard supporting and developing a love of learning and deep inquiry among my students, I struggled with the realization that larger academic systems were moving away from this goal and that my own inner life was slowly withering away.

My growing disillusionment with academic life, as well as the external pressures of the COVID pandemic that shifted my kids from in-person to at-home virtual schooling for over a year, led to my shifting gears and working as a horse trainer for several years. In that time, I was able to reconnect with a part of myself that had been on hold while I was slogging away trying to continually prove my worth as contingent faculty. I learned again how to revel in the joy and challenge of deep thought and inquiry on a regular basis. I taught horses and riders from widely different backgrounds and took lessons from as many teachers as I could find, doing both physical and mental work together on a daily basis. I was effectively moving out of the "world of the library" and into the person-to-person "world of

action,” stepping out of the insular academic world and back into the “ordinary” world that I had grown up in, one of both manual and thoughtful labor that allowed time for self-reflection, inquiry, and contemplation.<sup>3</sup> Probably unsurprisingly, my inner intellectual life grew more in those few years than it had in much of my time as contingent faculty.

More recently I’ve tried to find balance between “ordinary” work and my intellectual-academic self, working as an independent scholar and consultant. I also substitute teach at a small charter high school and teach private music lessons, where I find a great deal of joy in engaging with thoughtful and curious students. This approach has proven to be a good way to marry my teaching experience, my love of teaching and learning, and my desire to engage with research on my own terms while also allowing time to work horses, clean barn stalls, and connect with what Hitz refers to as “our rustic human roots.”<sup>4</sup> Although challenging in its own right, this arrangement allows for the discipline of intellectual life in a way that my experiences with the commodified, adjunct-driven higher education system simply could not. Do I miss my meditative daily walks across campus, access to university libraries and archives, and thoughtful discussions with students and colleagues over coffee? Absolutely. What I do not miss is the feeling of dystopian angst from running on the hamster wheel of academic achievement and arbitrary measures of productivity that seemed to qualify my own value as a person and that continue to drive too many aspects of the current higher ed system.

In the current world of constant distraction, often superficial engagement with the world around us, and increasingly commodified approaches to formal education, Hitz’s argument for everyday intellectualism is welcome and refreshing. Our current socio-economic situation poses numerous challenges to this endeavor, though, as more and more people are driven to work more and more hours just to make ends meet while having less and less time to foster their inner lives.<sup>5</sup> The book offers little in the way of suggestions for how to remedy this problem aside from suggesting that even if our intellectual institutions decay and collapse, society must remain aware of and connected to the human need for learning and the communities which it supports.<sup>6</sup> I wish there were further discussion of this obviously difficult issue, but admittedly there are no clear solutions or easy fixes. Hopefully a shared awareness of the value of and need for fostering our inner intellectual lives will help bring back some sort of balance.

If you’re able, pick up a hobby that you’ve been putting off or return to one you’ve let get dusty on a shelf, literally or figuratively. Encourage active discourse about whatever topic seems interesting at the dinner table or at work, whether it be the changing weather or the presence of butterflies in

your garden or new research on the impact of space travel on seed germination rates. Practice singing or drawing or playing a musical instrument, and then share that experience with someone else just for the fun of it. Find a volunteering opportunity that involves manual labor, like clearing hiking trails or maintaining senior housing, and see if that serves not only your community but also your inner life. Let's all hope that these seemingly small acts, when done with intention, will lead us to greater fulfillment, deeper engagement with ourselves and our communities, and more meaningful lives of inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> An example of this from a musicological perspective is one of “schools” of training: while formal European tradition references different schools of performance technique, the “school” for a cowboy singing while herding cattle might be the range itself and the “school” for jazz musicians in the 1930s may have been the nightclubs and musicians who surrounded them.

<sup>2</sup> Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 8–9.

<sup>3</sup> Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 37.

<sup>4</sup> Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 121.

<sup>5</sup> Special thanks to my colleague and friend, Joanna Smolko, for several thoughtful discussions on this topic.

<sup>6</sup> Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 201.