

The Hidden Pleasures of Intellectual Life: From Communion to Voluntary Poverty

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I was born and grew up in the developing country of Vietnam during the time the country was emerging from colonization and recovering from the Vietnam War. Poverty and hardship—and with that, malnutrition, poor health, illiteracy, and violence—were prevalent. I, as well as many of my friends, was struggling at school but striving to survive, dreaming about “the life of the mind” as the only way out of poverty and the hardship of heavy manual labor. In other words, at that time all I wanted was to become an intellectual as the means to a brighter future with a high social status and a materially comfortable life. Over the years, as I have become an intellectual and chosen an intellectual life as my lifelong vocation, especially after reading Zena Hitz’s *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life*, I have realized that, while one’s life of the mind and social status may be connected, that is not what intellectual life is all about. Throughout the book, while acknowledging that intellectual activity can be and has been instrumentalized, Hitz reclaims the purity and the other-oriented characteristic of the life of the mind: “we learn in order to love.”¹ I have received this book as an affirmation of my vocation choice and as a helpful reminder to keep me on track on my learning journey ahead. With that in mind, I will respond with appreciation to Hitz’s description of intellectual life as a physical, mental, and social withdrawal from the world; for this withdrawal does not lead to isolation and egoism but to communion. At the same time, I would also like to point out that, while this withdrawal from the world, which I would call “voluntary poverty,” conditions and facilitates intellectual activity, involuntary poverty handicaps, even destroys learning.

It is not difficult to see that intellectual activity both requires and is described as a physical and spatial withdrawal from the world. As Hitz’s example of Renee shows, one would find it very challenging, if not impossible, to read, think, and reflect while working at the concierge desk of an apartment building; they would need a hidden, quiet room to withdraw into after work. Perhaps spatial retreat is the most basic manifestation of one’s “hidden, unspoken, invisible inner life.”² Hitz convincingly points out that physical enclosure is helpful only insofar as it keeps us away from distractions; meanwhile, “there is rather some fundamental conflict, difficult to notice

and even more difficult to describe, between the desire to know, learn, and understand and desires for anything else, especially anything involving social and political life.”³ Indeed, we all, more than once, have experienced the intentional, or unintentional, situational compromise of the desire to learn and understand with the desire for material wealth, high status, social acceptance, and honor. Learning is then no longer for the search for truth but is either instrumentalized or traded off for the lower good of fame and wealth. Thus, intellectual life requires mental and social withdrawal, a form of voluntary poverty that one must be committed to. It is not a commitment one can make once and for all, but a choice that needs to be constantly made and remade.

I find this description of intellectual life as a deliberate withdrawal from the world resonant with my life experience; and thus, it reaffirms my vocational choice. I was a religious sister for almost twenty years. Recently, during my time in graduate school, I rediscovered the intellectual gift given to me, which I did not pay much attention to, or more accurately, I did not have the opportunity to actualize. All of a sudden, the desire to understand and the joy of learning drew me into the ever-more of theological inquiries and imaginations, and I felt called to the life of the mind. After a significant period of discernment, I eventually chose to leave religious life to pursue an intellectual apostolate. It was a tough choice to make because, as a religious, although I did not have an overly comfortable life, I never had to worry about where to live or what to eat. Given my secure housing and financial stability, along with a whole web of communal, familial, and pastoral relationships, I could have had an easy life with social ecclesial status, and with that, respect and a little bit of privilege. On the contrary, choosing intellectual life, I have been stripped of all that. Being all by myself and living on a limited stipend, I know more about what poverty really means materially, mentally, and socially. The dream of my youth to become an intellectual for a brighter future turned into an illusion. Paradoxically, since the moment I made that difficult choice, my inner freedom has grown, and my desire to learn and know has become stronger and more honest.

While informing us that withdrawal from the world is a requirement and characteristic of intellectual life, Hitz shows that, surprisingly, while this withdrawal may appear to lead to alienation and isolation, it actually points to communion and other-orientedness. This is because “intellectual life opens up ways of relating that are based not on use but on mutual respect in light of a common goal.”⁴ “Truth” is another name for this common goal that all humans, as intellectual beings, strive to reach, regardless of being writers or readers, dead or living, instructors or learners.⁵ Likewise, understanding is meant to be shared, “as if love overflows from understanding,

or as if understanding were intrinsically generous.”⁶ This communion and other-orientedness may be viewed as a reflection or imitation of *perichoresis*—the divine dance of the Trinity, which describes the communion and dynamic relationship between the Persons of the Trinity.⁷ Believing that humans are made in the image and likeness of God, I would take courage to say that the object of learning for its own sake is to be in loving communion with others and the Other. To this point, Hitz admits: “I am not able to settle this question to my satisfaction,”⁸ although elsewhere in the book, she is pretty clear that “intellectual work is a form of loving service”⁹ and “we learn in order to love.”¹⁰

While I appreciate Hitz’s points on intellectual life in relation to voluntary poverty and human connection, I would have expected her position on involuntary poverty to be more clearly spelled out. Hitz mentioned Martin Eden and the Amazon warehouse worker, whose hardship prevents them from thinking and learning.¹¹ However, she considers their difficult life situations no more than a distraction, and poverty is not good because it may inject a desire for comfort and pleasures: “Poverty and deprivation instill a fierce desire to be satisfied, comfortable, suffused with pleasures. They drive us, as we saw in the examples of Martin Eden or the worker at the Amazon warehouse, to drink and distraction.”¹² This may be true, but poverty does much more than that. As children suffering from poverty, my brother and I could not read or learn anything when our stomachs were empty for many hours, which caused our vision to become blurry and our bodies to tremble. We could not complete homework because we had to work in the field or do the housework after school during the day, and there was no light at night. I was lucky and able to make it to college, and eventually I ended up here sharing this experience. My brother could not make it to college; he got married and has children. He loves philosophy but never has time to read, since he works day and night to get enough bread for his children. Similarly, one cannot read, think, reflect, or do any intellectual activity when living in a shared house full of people, in a room next to the laundry, where the laundry runs almost every night, when they try to rest and recharge. I can go on and on with examples of involuntary poverty. These examples indicate that “the world” is not always in us; it is also outside us, and when poverty is involuntary, it is often beyond our control and not easy to escape. Involuntary poverty can deprive one of learning for its own sake. Therefore, although intellectual life and the hidden pleasure with it is a universal good available to all human beings,¹³ it is not accessible to all.

My purpose in this response is to appreciate Hitz’s book and its powerful message regarding human learning and intellectual life. I also aim to

point out a limitation in her view of involuntary poverty and its harm to our capacity of learning and our access to the universal good of intellectual life. Although my experience and perspective may not be representative in the Western and North American world, it is, unfortunately, the reality in which many of our brothers and sisters from different parts of the world live today. How should we intellectual professionals respond to this reality? What type of intellectual should we be to make the hidden pleasure of intellectual life more accessible to others? Or will we choose to respond at all? While I strongly believe in the transformative power of intellectual work as a loving service, how one is to actualize that power depends on their sociocultural context, life circumstances, and even privileged position. Ultimately, it is all up to each reader or intellectual's commitments and creativity.

¹ Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton University Press, 2020), 111.

² Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 55.

³ Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 57.

⁴ Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 101.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 112.

⁷ Saint John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa* 8, edited by E. M. Buytaert (The Franciscan Institute, 1955). For elaboration of *perichoresis*, see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 270–72.

⁸ Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 112.

⁹ Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 23.

¹⁰ Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 111.

¹¹ Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 38.

¹² Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 95.

¹³ Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 22.