



CATHERINE PROJECT

Annual Report, September 2020 - June 2021

We are reaching the end of the first year of the Catherine Project, and I am delighted to share with you an account of our activities thus far, along with our hopes for the future.

We are extremely proud to have been able so far to serve 115 individual adults in their desire to think and to learn seriously within a community based on books and open conversation. The radical simplicity of the Catherine Project encouraged the formation of communities comprising individuals from diverse places and walks of life. Our readers are homemakers, mothers and grandmothers, food service workers, musicians, non-profit managers, academics and lawyers, and those enduring long-term unemployment. They read with us from multiple locations in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, as well as from every region of North America.

Our Oxford-style tutorials drew dedicated volunteer academics and dedicated readers, almost all of whom worked together for a full academic year. The readers wrote weekly papers and read stretches from the canons of classical literature. We began with fifteen readers total and were able to expand to twenty-four by the end of the year. We are very proud to have offered such high quality courses—as with all of our offerings last year—with all volunteers and at no cost whatsoever.

Our peer-led reading groups, however, showed the most dramatic growth of interest over the course of the year, with a culminating event that I call “the Kierkegaard explosion.” We began in September with two small groups, one on Aristophanes and one on Kafka. The leaders of the Kafka group approached me in late October asking for more readers to help support the greater challenge of reading Kierkegaard’s *Either-Or*. Late October is generally very hard ground for new academic endeavors. I put out a simple call on Twitter: “Who wants to read *Either-Or* on Saturday nights?” The post went wild. I got more than a hundred messages and we formed three additional groups to accommodate the overflow. These four groups began Kierkegaard in the late fall, continued through the holidays and met well into the winter. In the spring, we organized eight reading groups for close to a hundred readers.

All in all, thanks to the zeal and effort of eight volunteer tutors, twelve volunteer discussion group leaders, and one hundred and fifteen readers, from September 2020 to June 2021, the Catherine Project coordinated:

- 11 Oxford-style tutorials with a total of 25 individual readers. Tutorial readings included the epics of Homer, Virgil, and Ovid, tragedies by Aeschylus and Sophocles, and selected works of Plato and Aristotle.
- 1 tutorial in ancient Greek with 3 readers, which remains ongoing.
- 13 reading groups for 90 individuals, many of whom attended multiple groups. Texts (and authors) studied included *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoyevsky), *Either-Or* (Kierkegaard), *Symposium* (Plato), *First and Second Discourses* (Rousseau), and many others.

Most volunteer tutors and group leaders chose enthusiastically to continue. Some readers participated in multiple tutorials and/or reading groups. Many of these groups spontaneously elected to continue meeting after the conclusion of their initial reading schedules, moving organically onto other related (and unrelated) texts. One noteworthy tutorial lost its tutor early on, about whose loss the Project Director was left in ignorance. Its readers continued on their own, meeting every week to discuss Homer from their homes in Montreal, Nairobi, and Dubai.

Despite the easing of pandemic-related restrictions, we see signs of a persistent hunger for the distinct and serious intellectual culture the Project looks to establish.

In the coming year, the Project has many exciting objectives. In addition to the continued organization of tutorials and reading groups, we hope to expand our tutorial offerings in languages and in writing. We are adding a Euclid reading group in the summer, which we hope will be only the beginning of regular mathematical offerings. Crucially, we look forward to attaining nonprofit legal status, launching our official website, and so being able to accept donations from readers and friends of the Project. In this regard, a friend of the Project has generously donated a visual identity for the Project—including the logo above—which will be fully unveiled when the website goes live.

In order for us to continue the Project as we have and to expand it as we hope to, our most pressing need is for a paid staff member to handle the establishment of a legal status, the reception of donations, the launching and management of the webpage, and the basic activities of receiving new readers and organizing volunteers and groups. Such a person is needed simply to maintain what we have done already, as well as to put what we have done on a firmer footing in its publicity, its funding, and its organization. The retreat of COVID-19 may also challenge us to develop forms of outreach to new readers more elaborate and work-intensive than Twitter. (Since it was always our goal to reach readers with limited learning opportunities, such a challenge is a real opportunity for us.) Since we are still new, we seek to hire this person on the experimental term of one year. For this year, we seek to pay a just wage of \$60,000, along with provision for healthcare. When non-profit registration fees, subscription fees, and basic equipment is added, our current needs amount to \$100,000. Over the course of the year, we will have a chance to see what sort of regular income going into the future might be available to us, in the form of reader donations, philanthropy, and grants. At the end of this year, we will reevaluate our structure and our needs accordingly.

We will approach potential donors and grant organizations over the next weeks and months in the hopes of raising these funds. We are deeply grateful for all the moral support that you offer, as well as any financial support you might consider giving.

Our challenge has been and always will be to provide opportunities to study and to learn with others on the condition of desire alone. We will never charge our readers tuition, but we will always welcome donations that we hope will hold them responsible for the community that ultimately rests on their interest alone.

Our profound gratitude is extended to Anne Folan, who has undertaken our website design; to Maca Olson, who designed such a beautiful brand portfolio; and to all who have advised, encouraged, and offered us help in this new experiment in education and community.

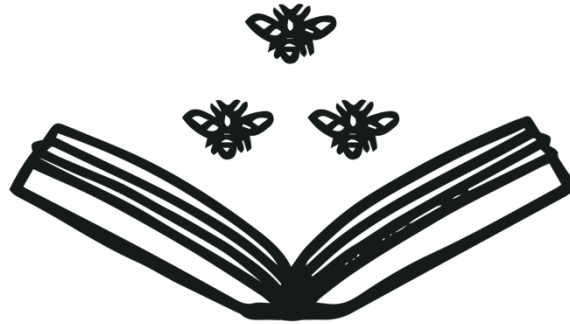
I attach here the most important words about the Catherine Project, the testimony of our readers. As always, I welcome any questions or reflections on the work of the Catherine Project, past or future.

With deepest gratitude,

Zena Hitz

For all at the Catherine Project

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Testimonials

“My tutorial in Attic Greek continues to be one of the best parts of my life.”

“I wanted to tell you again how much I enjoyed the Kierkegaard reading group. There were such lively and engaging discussions, and I got so much more out of the text than I would have had I tried to tackle it alone. Also, I suspect this will come as no surprise: ---- was such an excellent group leader, always prepared and insightful, but also an exceptional facilitator. At our last meeting we were all raving about his poise and talent for bringing out the best in each of us.

Thank you so much for setting up and coordinating the Project/making this experience possible. Kierkegaard group made me feel like I was in undergrad again. Ideas from *Either/Or* and class discussion have permeated my day-to-day, coloring the way I understand myself and folks around me, the way I read other books or watch films/tv. Life feels more vibrant and laden with meaning -- which is a real treasure in these long pandemic days spent shackled to a capricious dissertation.”

“Once again, thank you for the discussions. It has truly been a pleasure and highlight of my week.”

“[My tutorial] has kind of been one of the opportunities of my life and I continue to be truly grateful for it.”

“[The Project] is indeed an eye opener, a space to share and ponder, a true oasis.”

“The Catherine Project reading groups and tutorials have reintroduced the joy of reading great books into my life. Both the leaders and the readers make the encounters with great texts so much richer than is possible by reading alone. Reading in a community is just a deeper and richer way to experience these works.”

“[The Catherine Project] has participants from all walks of life, from professors to business owners, from scholars of classics to the first-time readers. All these different participants bring the diverse relationships they have formed with the texts to the groups. Being a part of these discussions with the immense support of excellent tutors and group leaders has been one of the most intellectually enriching experiences of my life. The friendships formed in these groups have lasted beyond the scope of reading groups. The texts vary from the times of antiquity to modernity, from philosophy to literature. Reading these texts with amazing fellow readers has broadened my understanding of the classics in general and has brought me closer to the classics of my own culture.”