

# ‘Culture is What Preserves Difficulty’: An Interview with Zena Hitz

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**Kasia Mika-Bresolin:** One of the most influential conceptualizations of difficulty is by George Steiner, who, primarily in relation to poetry, identified four kinds of difficulty: contingent, modal, tactical and ontological. I’d like to begin by asking how you define difficulty, whether from a philosophical or experiential perspective? Is there a good kind of difficulty? Why does it seem that difficulty is particularly cherished by the Humanities?

**Zena Hitz:** I think Steiner’s interest in difficulty is different from mine, though there are connecting lines. I think that there’s philosophical thinking in a broad sense, which is often connected with scientific thinking, where we have a mode of intellectual activity, but we can’t actually understand how it works. We can *do* it, but we don’t understand *why* we can do it. One classic example is mathematical physics, which makes nature mathematical. But why should nature — something that’s supposedly outside of us, ‘in the world’ — appear to us in mathematical form? It feels, I think, to scientists as if math is real, out there in the world, but that doesn’t make any sense. Philosophy has grappled with this difficulty for hundreds of years. It’s what I would call a fundamental question. We can make progress in thinking about it, but the danger is always false certainty. For me, we need to confront difficulty to escape false certainty. This goes back to Socrates and the importance of knowing what one doesn’t know. In philosophy, science and literature in its own way, there’s a false confidence that needs to be undermined. That’s the wholesome, good part of difficulty. It’s true that difficulty can be overwhelming in the educational context. The students and young people that I have encountered in the US are unaccustomed to difficulty and very frightened by it. It’s important therefore not to overwhelm them, but that’s more of a psychological,

contingent issue than an intellectually substantive issue. My own sense is that people should take on as much difficulty as they can without being overwhelmed or losing hope. I am sensitive, as a teacher, to people just collapsing in the face of too much difficulty at once. I think that in relation to difficulty there are fundamental questions that are not quite intractable — you can make progress in your thinking on them — but it's very hard work, and the danger is always false certainty. Difficulty is honesty, and that is why we should treasure it. If you look at the way things are, you see that things are difficult. If things look easy, you are likely missing something. That's my sense.

**KM-B:** I was wondering whether it's difficulty's open-endedness and iterative dimension that makes it especially appealing to the Humanities?

**ZH:** I think that difficulty in the sense in which I'm thinking about it is also common to mathematics and science. Those are not my fields, but my guess is that they face similar challenges now that there's more pressure for false certainty than there should be. I think difficulty is a bit of an acquired taste, not everyone loves it instantly. I think that I learned to love it when I realized that encounters with difficulty liberated you from false certainties. For me, my love of difficulty and the sense that something is still to be understood connects to my horror for the strictures of false certainty, for anything that's rigid or ideological; those patterns of thought that we take in by accident and that determine everything that we think. So, I think that the humanists who love difficulty — which unfortunately isn't everyone — treasure that liberation, that sense of being freed from inauthentic habits of thought.

**KM-B:** If we take difficulty to be both a category of thought and a quality of experience, what role does difficulty play in your life? Can you think of moments where life's difficulties have forced you to revisit your understanding of the texts you teach and write about, and conversely, where grappling with the text's stuckness made you see life differently? In short, what is the relationship between textual difficulty and difficulty in life?

**ZH:** That's a huge question. Let me try to give one or two examples. I can remember when I was in the conversion process, coming into the Catholic Church. The Sunday mass reading was the story of Abraham's

sacrifice of Isaac. I had not had a real problem with the conversion up to that point, but suddenly I was horrified to be entering a religion where a god would ask someone to sacrifice their child and I underwent a kind of crisis. Then I remembered that this is what Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* is about; so probably for the first time in my life, I read philosophy to try to confront a personal difficulty. And because that book — and Kierkegaard in general — is extremely difficult, the difficulty was affirmed more than it was solved. Similarly, when I went to talk to the priest, he didn't resolve the difficulty I was experiencing, but he did recognize and affirm it, and, for some reason, that was what gave me the strength to move on with it. But I also think that without that moment my commitment would have been very superficial.

So, with both life and books, I think that if you are not experiencing challenge and difficulty, then you might as well be changing clothes or trying on different consumer identities. Difficulty is a growth pang, in most cases. Even truly terrible difficulties, such as illness, violence or oppression, can be used for growth. They should never happen, but they can be used, and we can become bigger people through them. This is not to justify them, but it tells us something about what difficulty is, and why it is important.

I have had the experience of sitting with a difficulty for some years, and then it suddenly appearing completely differently. We think of intellectual life as being like a database, or something like the collection of truths, yet it's more like a garden: things grow at rates that you can't control. There are things that you can do with the soil, and the light, and the fertilizer, but you can't ultimately control it. The acknowledgement of difficulty is therefore partly the acknowledgement that things sometimes develop in their own way. To return to the sacrifice of Isaac, I no longer think of it as being about a cruel god who wants us to sacrifice our happiness, but rather as a story about the kind of complete surrender of the will that is required for a life of faith and which turns out to be a key to happiness, rather than an attack on happiness. A stance of surrender or abandonment becomes a way of overcoming various obstacles within us. This is one example of how difficulty has come to shape my perspective.

**KM-B:** *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* seems to bring to the fore a number of questions about difficulty, such as the particular relationship between difficulty and time, as well as around the politicization of intellectual life.<sup>1</sup> You have talked about how

the book was perceived to be advocating some sort of depoliticized withdrawal from the world. Do you agree, and how might these questions relate to the subject of difficulty?

**ZH:** When I was writing *Lost in Thought*, it felt like everything that I was reading was treating political life as an end that intellectual life served. This felt false to me and constraining as to the kinds of things that we could do with our minds. As with the economic arguments, there's a way in which all the arguments were directed at something like success. Whether you are going out and fighting for the best values for your political community or striving to make a lot of money, it's all about success. But the stories that I found in the book really suggested to me something different, which was about failure, and the ways in which the intellectual life is a resource in failure as much as in success. So, I really emphasized the inwardness of the intellectual life — the sense in which, when you have nothing else, you could still have that. I stand by that, and think it represents something important about intellectual life, but what I did not sufficiently develop are the positive political consequences of the intellectual life, as I'm promoting it. It really is a liberation to cultivate an intellectual life. Our circumstances may not always permit us to live out that liberation in the way that we would like. So, if you're sent to Siberia for life, your liberation is only going to be internal and with the people you interact with and is just not going to change the world. But if you do have circumstances that permit it, then as a free person, as a liberated person, you can shape your community in a way that's healthy and good. And a community of free people is the best kind of community, a community where we deliberate about what's best for us. My vision of intellectual life is participatory and egalitarian, and egalitarianism is really embattled in our political world right now. The intellectual liberation of the people at the bottom of the political hierarchy is an antidote of sorts. How much of an antidote depends on the circumstances, so I can see now that there are positive political consequences for this type of intellectual life, and if I had more presence of mind, I might have brought those out. I gestured towards this with someone like Dorothy Day but that was not as fully developed as it could have been. There were people who questioned how I could use Malcolm X as an example of inwardness, given his political activism, but I think that his political life was rooted in that inner life.

**KM-B:** Was there a preconception that any discussion of political egalitarianism should immediately propose a set of social solutions?

Perhaps some criticisms as to the book's political withdrawal were symptomatic of a conflation of the political and partisan. They wish you had said, for example, 'therefore, do this', be it eating less meat or something else. I wonder whether there is a certain solutionism that sneaks into conceptions of intellectual life.

**ZH:** That connects to the question of difficulty because political life, when it's going well, is difficult. I think that one of our diseases is thinking that somehow the solutions are out there, and we just need to act in concert, and then the right solution will fall into place and the problem will be solved. There will be no more poverty, no more climate change and everyone will be wealthy. But this is not the way life works and that perspective is not alive to the difficulties of being. We are time-limited human beings who do not fully control our circumstances. There are real problems that can be solved, but the sense that the solutions are always out there, and that we just need to implement them seems corrosive and dangerous to me.

**KM-B:** A common thread in your approach seems to be a loyalty to reality and to a kind of testing of the real. You have characterized reading and thinking as a refuge where realities are shown to us: the reality of our dignity and enduring realities about human life. Can you say more about the relationship between reading, intellectual difficulty and the revelation of realities?

**ZH:** I think it's complicated. When I was a child, like many childhood bookworms, I read to escape. Similarly, I think lots of academics are fleeing from something in their lives and want to absorb themselves in something; in a way, the less real it is, the better! In the best cases, as with a conversation, reading can open up unforeseen connections to the world. We have our little trajectories through the world, but when we read or talk to others our view is expanded. So, the practice of reading can undermine that sense of escape and put you in touch with unanticipated parts of the world.

**KM-B:** I wonder if that conversation is as much a conversation with yourself as with the voice that you encounter in the book.

**ZH:** Right. I think success in reading — and this is something I discussed at the end of *Lost in Thought* — means seeing what's real and what the other person is communicating to you. My example is Dorothy Day, whose reading about poverty in the US in the early

twentieth century revealed part of the world to her that she had been sheltered from as a middle-class person, and so she went out to find that world. Although the books she had read were somewhat melodramatic, narrow or ideological, they described something real. Attentively listening to another human being in conversation or through reading involves seeing something of what they see and that can be very concrete. I recently read, for example, *Free: Coming of Age at the End of History*, Lea Ypi's book about growing up in Albania. Now this is totally unlike my own experience. I did not grow up in Eastern Europe, witness a revolution, or have my country ruined by 'the global management of countries in trouble', yet I recognized her exposure as a child to a simplified way of thinking which then crumbles when she becomes a teenager. This is a profound experience that a lot of people undergo, and I think that this is partly what Steiner means when he talks about how communication is making your words fit the 'general shape of human recognition'. Bad books remain within the author's own subjective situation. My stress on the real relates to this communicative dimension of literature.

**KM-B:** Literature is a straightforward example, perhaps, because literature relies on words, and is an aesthetic and a cognitive journey. But what is the role of difficulty in other domains, such as philosophy or life, where the primary issue is not the beauty of the description? How does difficulty, in this wider sense, relate to what you the term 'the real'?

**ZH:** There is a dangerous tendency in philosophy to think that if you have mastered the terminology associated with a particular author and understand how the terminological pieces fit into an overall structure, then you've done your thinking. But the value of reading philosophy, and especially classical philosophers, lies in understanding what the terminology serves. To give you a negative example: when I was in graduate school, taking a seminar on Kant as part of the modern philosophy requirement, I wrote an essay on *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which was probably the most successful essay I ever wrote in graduate school. The professor loved it, and I felt completely immersed in the world of the book as I was writing it and understood exactly what was going on. Then, three months later, I looked at the essay and I had no idea what I was talking about. I think this was because I had fallen into this trap of fitting pieces together like a puzzle without reaching out into reality. It was only recently at

St. John's [College], where I teach a programme that involves studying early mathematical physicists and the mathematization of nature, that I suddenly understood the real problem that Kant was confronting. Kant was worried about *a priori* synthetic truth and the laws of nature. The laws of nature are meant to be universal, but how can they be universal? How could we prove something universal from experience and how could we reason our way into it? This was a real breakthrough for me, realizing there's a real problem that he's desperate to solve, and that it's a problem that we still have, and that's what's compelling.

I'll give you another example, which might be more accessible. I've read Plato's *Republic*, more or less, my whole life. I read it for the first time when I was a 17-year-old freshman, read it multiple times in graduate school, wrote a master's thesis on part of it and wrote a part of my dissertation on another part of it. Yet it was only later on, when I read Thucydides' account of the civil wars in Greece and imperialism, that I understood the kind of political chaos in which the book was written, and then it no longer seemed like an intellectual exercise but rather a response to an urgent, concrete existential problem. It represents an attempt to restore or redeem life in the middle of political chaos and collapse. It is not just intellectual fancy. The best moments with philosophy are where you see what the real problem is and you're not just solving textual puzzles.

**KM-B:** As a teacher of literature and theory, I sometimes wonder whether we are so concerned with terminology that the surface unpacking takes precedence over the big question, such as 'What does justice mean in this text?' I want to turn now to striking comments you made about the affinity between intellectual and manual labour, and how during the best kind of intellectual work, 'the rubber hits the road and a piece of reality breaks through'. That seems to me such a beautiful image. Why do we often oppose manual and intellectual work and how do conceptions of difficulty map onto that binary? What kind of deconstructive work is there to be done here?

**ZH:** Manual labour is very hard to fake. A plumber can't pretend to fix the plumbing, nor will you get good results as a gardener if you do not know how the plants and the soil are going to react. This is, I think, one of the reasons why manual labour is so therapeutic for people habitually involved in intellectual labour: it proposes clear limitations that are hard to evade. Intellectual activity, on the other hand, because it takes place in words, just naturally generates illusions. You can spend

days, months, weeks, years, your entire life doing something that doesn't make any sense. It's absolutely terrifying. You can't do that with manual labour. An entire academic career could constitute an utter waste of time. That is simply not possible with a life spent gardening or collecting garbage. Academics should think about this with a real sense of terror, because it's a real possibility and it has something to do with the way that language is. This relates to that earlier problem of how lining up terms with one another can feel like work. One of the things that I used to see, when I was closer to academic philosophy, was that there's a kind of thesis-generating machine: you have a grid, there's various possible views that have been tried in some areas and not others, and you fill in the slots. It's a kind of fake systematicity. There is no algorithm for identifying substantial philosophical problems of the kind I identified a moment ago in relation to Kant and Plato. All you can do is continually ask yourself whilst you are reading: how is this real? How does this connect with things? Do others view it in the same way? I think it is true that when intellectual activity is working, it's just like manual labour. It comes through in those valuable experiences where you try to apply some grand interpretative framework or historical thesis to a text, but it just collapses. This is always painful, but it is also amazing, in some sense, as it proves that we're doing something real and not just playing a game with words. This is one reason to treasure difficulty, as it highlights those moments when you can see that what you're doing is real as opposed to just a game. I have framed this in primarily negative terms as when the false certainty collapses, but when that happens then real insight becomes possible.

**KM-B:** How can we explain the dominance of this false binary of the humble manual versus the erudite intellectual if in fact they are so closely related? Why is difficulty conceptualized differently in relation to manual and intellectual labour?

**ZH:** I am opposed to the hierarchical distinction between manual and intellectual labour, but I think that there is a truth buried in it, which is that the intellectual capacity is truly amazing. Great works of literature, mathematics, science, philosophy, history or political theory are incredible human accomplishments. That they have not been necessary for human survival makes them even more precious in a way, as is also true of music. I think therein lies the root of the prejudice, that such endeavours go beyond matters of survival towards



something like a decent life. We should realize, on the one hand, that intellectual endeavour rarely works the way that it's supposed to and is significantly less useful than manual labour. This is something that we should confront when we think about how really difficult intellectual activity is, how hard it is to really encounter reality through it, and not just get lost in words. At the same time, the use of the mind really is for everyone. This was less obvious in the past, before mass literacy; it never occurred to the ancient Greeks, who were very contemptuous of manual labour, that a manual labourer could read and think. I think that this is one of the best things about the modern era, and consequently there is an obligation for us to build communities where that can be realized; where people are not working five jobs and trying to raise kids and have no time to think. This, then, is how I would soften the dichotomy: on the one hand, intellectual achievements are incredible and rarer than we think; and on the other hand, everyone should have the opportunity to nurture an intellectual life. In the utopia, we get something like a healthy human community where everyone sees the crucial value of what everyone else is doing and has some share in it. I think that people who never do manual labour do not experience limitation and that confrontation with reality in a way that is very unhealthy. So again, this is something our democratic culture is in a position to recognize: that there's something healthy both in confronting reality through manual labour and in exercising the intellect in fruitful ways.

**KM-B:** There seem to be several threads, here. One seems to connect to a Gramscian distinction between the organic and the traditional intellectual. Gramsci makes it into your book, via his idea that we're all intellectuals, because of course there's a direction of thought that you engage in even while you're making dinner, right? But you also alluded to the positive value of failure a number of times, inasmuch as it makes one aware of death and finitude. Can we talk more about a sense of humility that I think manual labour sometimes captures; in that it is 'closer to the ground'? I don't mean this in a negative sense, but as a kind of positive humility, that opens your eyes to finitude, that neither you nor your words are eternal. Can difficulty bring these lines of questioning together?

**ZH:** I would frame it slightly differently. Recently I have been thinking about how technology and middle-class Western lifestyles shelter us from many kinds of difficulty: illness, ignorance, basic

mechanical failure. On an intellectual level, consider how search engines massively obscure difficulty: you don't know where the answer came from, how to evaluate it on the basis of its sources or what the competing points of view are. There is a danger when people don't know that knowledge requires effort and an exercise of judgement, which is contingent, and could be unsettled in the next minute. Likewise with manual labour: the beautiful appliances that do things for us mean that there are certain kinds of difficulty that we never confront. This is why it can be very healthy to voluntarily give up some kind of technology and do things by hand that you could buy more cheaply, to avoid losing touch with the conditions of your humanity. My sister-in-law taught sewing at City College in San Francisco, and one of the things she would try to teach her students was that every stitch on every piece of clothing they bought was made by a human. We use machines to make clothing, but a human being is always involved. People forget that a real human being made their clothes, and this is part of the alienation that we live with. It happens at every level and in all kinds of spheres and crosses intellectual and manual labour. I fervently hope for a counter-reaction to that, as occurred in the 1960s. The hippie movement, for all of its comic aspects, was a real attempt to recover humanity from industrialized culture. I think, in that spirit, we need to voluntarily relinquish some of the fruits of technology and counter the alienated aspects of contemporary life.

**KM-B:** Academics sometimes seem to fear the real, taking shelter in a historical period or theoretical field. Can this be explained by a violence connected with the real, and especially a violence associated with the world in which our students live?

**ZH:** 'Violence' is an interesting word. I think there's a variety of ways of thinking about difficulty in this sense. One relates to what I was just talking about: the satisfaction of every impulse gives you a certain kind of comfort but to overcome those impulses requires discipline, to use an old-fashioned word, and discipline is violent; not brutally violent — it doesn't draw blood — but it's a deliberate restriction and it's painful. There is the pain, then, of giving up comforts, of sacrifice. There's a distinguished tradition that connects everything to death as the great challenge and sees death as foreshadowed everywhere. This is a beautiful, old-fashioned point of view which has some truth in it. In a more basic sense, there is simply the fear of discomfort. Real thinking can be very painful, inasmuch as it can be disruptive to our

social worlds and the kinds of conformity that they demand. It's very important to us to have a sense of connection to others. We'd rather be connected to others on the basis of a lie than to encounter some truth that's going to break that relationship. There are, then, many human forces that work against difficulty. I've spent most of my life studying what you call Western culture. I haven't delved into the depths of tribal cultures or Eastern cultures. This is not out of contempt but because I always feel that I have so much more to learn from my own field of study. I've never run out of things to be interested in. I would guess, however, that in every culture there exists some kind of discipline which privileges difficulty and encourages us to fight against our impulses. Culture *is* what preserves difficulty, in some sense. The little I know about wisdom literature — which comes close to being a universal genre, as far as I understand it — is that money isn't everything. Why? Because we always act as if it is! So, there's something in us that fights difficulty, and it always takes substantial, collective, long-term efforts to try to recover it.

**KM-B:** I love this definition of culture as that which preserves difficulty and helps us master our impulses, so that we have a sense of direction in the difficulty, so that we are not just remaining stuck in Kant for the sake of 'stuckness'. If we stay with your epoch, Plato seems to play such a large role in your teaching and writing. I had the opportunity to read Plato on the Catherine Project this semester.<sup>2</sup> I felt that I had moved from an academic, professional sphere to something closer to the ground and to the text. This relates, perhaps, to the discussion of uselessness in your book. I wasn't doing it for teaching, but because it felt good for the soul and for my mind to read Plato. I don't read classical Greek, and I felt quite lost, but I was struck by how people in the dialogues become angry when they're being questioned and realize that everything that they said has been turned upside down. I'm thinking of one of the opening dialogues, when Meno is stuck and fed up with that stuckness. Plato replies that he is also stuck, and they are joined in that, and there seemed to be something productive about this; that only by being stuck can you see things differently. Should we not cherish aporia, rather than fearing it as a kind of arid desert that we should flee? What is the difficulty of this kind of impasse?

**ZH:** The *Dialogues* are foundational texts for me, for St. John's College and for the Catherine Project. The more I read them, the more I feel like I'm returning, somehow, to the sources of my way of being and

living. The philosophical vocation is laid out there with unrivalled clarity. In simple terms, there are things that we want other than truth and reality. What does Callicles want? What does Euthyphro want? What does Thrasymachus want? These characters are clearly hostile to Socrates and cannot stand what he's doing. Every year, in every classroom, there are people who are sympathetic to that. You can always find people who hate Socrates because he is so irritating. Things can always be undermined, but what do you do once you have undermined them? The simple answer is that we fear *aporia* because we want something other than truth and reality. We want to look good; we want to avoid suffering; we want to sound confident. The great foil for Socrates are these ambitious young people who are trying to succeed in politics and some of whom are his students, notoriously, so it's not as if he really escapes this kind of difficulty. Still, the realm of success is on the outside. There is a clear sense that *aporia* and perplexity are incompatible with success, in this context, at least in the long term. Another really valuable thing about the *Dialogues* — and this gets back to your earlier question about how can you know it's worthwhile to go on — is that they are so intellectually fertile. They just keep on going and generate a massive wealth of ideas and reflection all as a response to perplexity. This is one of the reasons why they're such precious texts; they simultaneously honour the fruitfulness that can happen from reflection, and the humility and the difficulty of it.

**KM-B:** It might be a banal thing to say, but the unpacking of difficulty happens in community, as well, and you highlight that in the book; similarly, the Catherine Project has as its mission this kind of commitment to humility and community. This seems in contrast to difficulty portrayed as elitist or exclusionary. I wonder in what ways, in your experience, can difficulty be a liberating, egalitarian force? Can difficulty contribute to building communities and collective experience, and if so, how?

**ZH:** Yes, based on my experience at St. John's. This was also part of my vision for the Catherine Project. In conventional education, knowing and confidence are rewarded with success. Not understanding is not rewarded. It's considered a failure. But in most cases, confident knowingness is a facade that's put on for the sake of advancement; it gets you the grade, the promotion or the fellowship. Especially in academic contexts, people are unwilling to admit ignorance, as if it were this terrible humiliation for you to be an expert in classical

philosophy and get up in front of a crowd and admit you don't understand a passage in the *Theaetetus*. There is a toxic culture of success based on a confident appearance of knowing. In that context, collaborative learning that prizes the open acknowledgement of ignorance is extremely valuable. It explodes the structure, in a sense, accommodating those people who exist in every classroom who don't understand but who won't admit it, and you open up a space of collaborative learning through honestly acknowledged questions. It's very difficult to do. St. John's is a very small place with a lot of arcane traditions that that make such an approach possible, and it can be hard to transfer it to other contexts. I have seen it happen so many times, however, that I know it's possible. If I no longer worked within a supportive institution, I would have to try to find some other way to live those values out. I don't think it is understood that ideals require a lot of work and flexibility to keep alive. There may be things that are possible in one person's classroom or institution that aren't possible elsewhere. I know people who have set up, for instance, within their academic institutions, little programmes or pockets where you can undertake this kind of learning. It is crucial for education to find a way to reverse the hostile structures and value the honest acknowledgement of ignorance. The enemy is not the honest disavowal of knowledge but false certainty for the sake of success.

**KM-B:** Are there specific texts that you see as difficult and particularly valuable in that sense? And finally, do you have any passages that carry you through the impasse, or aporia?

**ZH:** I think the classics, whatever their difficulty, are worth it; the ancient epics, *Gilgamesh*, *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, Virgil, Plato's dialogues; these are foundational for me. I've spent a lot of time, in recent years, with the Hebrew Bible. It's unfashionable to be reading that, these days, but I think that's a shame as it's an incredible collection of books that are full of important questions. In a way, even though I'm a person of faith myself, it's a shame that these have been given a religious cover, because they open up the basics of human life. I would encourage people to persevere with those. One text that might sound a little too religious for your audience is the Book of Lamentations, written when the Israelites are in exile in Babylon and it's a scene of total civic and community destruction. This is something I think we should be reflecting on more. We imagine that somehow our communities are invincible, and that they're always going to be there, but we know on

reflection that they're not. In the middle of the destruction the author Jeremiah says, 'God's mercies are new each morning, so great is his faithfulness. It is good to wait in silence for the salvation of the Lord. Let him sit alone in silence.'<sup>3</sup> It's chapter three of Lamentations, and it's beautiful. It's a speaker who is in a situation that is hopeless, who is waiting and watching and trusting. Not in a delusional way, such as 'Everything is going to be fine', but in a way that is serious and respectful of the horrors of the devastation. That is one text I go back to a lot.

**KM-B:** In a way we are back to waiting, where we were at the start. We talked about crushing certitudes, but also maybe the surprise of the unknown that difficulty brings. Do you have any final comments on difficulty?

**ZH:** Yes. I think that a lot of the analogies I found most helpful for thinking about the value of intellectual activity come from the world of interpersonal interactions. So, if a person stops surprising you, something's wrong. I'm sure we've all known relationships where it's so perfect they will never last. One of the reasons I think difficulty matters so much, then, is that it is so deeply connected to how we relate to others. We struggle to endure the difficulty of relating to others and the ways that others don't meet our expectations or have demands that we find difficult to meet. I think for most people it's almost intuitive that if things are perfect, seamless or easy, then that signals a danger we are living under a fantasy or an illusion. The best moments in our interactions with each other are ones where we bond despite the difficulty. The difficulty is necessary. We can't do without it.

## NOTES

- 1 Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).
- 2 The Catherine Project, co-founded by Hitz, runs tutorials and reading groups on great books, open to readers above the age of 16, from all walks of life, at no cost (both in person and online). It is guided by principles of hospitality, great books, zeal, conversation, self-direction, focus, seriousness and flexibility. See <https://catherineproject.org/about-us>, consulted 4 December 2023.

- 3 The full passage in Lamentations 3: 22–6 (RSV) reads: ‘The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. “The Lord is my portion,” says my soul, “therefore I will hope in him.” The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him. It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.’