

Letter to an Aspiring Intellectual

[Articles by Paul J. Griffiths](#)

You've asked me how to become an intellectual. You're young, it seems (only young people ask questions of that kind), and you think you might have an intellectual vocation, but you can't see what to do about it. What should you do in order to become the kind of person an intellectual is? What kind of life permits doing what intellectuals do? How can you begin to have such a life? This is what you ask, and these are good, if grandiose, questions.

They're also countercultural questions, at least in America. Here we tend toward contempt for intellectuals, when we think about them at all; our heroes are those who act rather than think, and especially those who find, or at least try for, wealth and fame. Most American parents would welcome their child's declaration of an intellectual vocation with dismay at the penury, obscurity, and unhappiness likely to follow from heeding that call. And they're unlikely to be wrong about the penury and the obscurity.

Still. The questions you ask are good ones because it's clear enough that among the things we humans do is think, and we do it with a remarkable intensity and application and precision and range. We can, and some few of us do, formulate questions and try to answer them, even when neither questions nor answers have immediate or obvious practical application. We develop concepts and distinctions and thought experiments aimed at a deeper, fuller, and more precise understanding. And we argue with those who differ from us, sometimes, it's true, out of the delight of battle and the urge for victory, but sometimes, too, because we find in argument a powerful device for clarifying a position and seeing how it might be improved.

The range of things we think about, too, is remarkable. It includes the nonhuman world in all its variety, past and present. That's what biologists, physicists, mathematicians, chemists, astronomers, theologians, and

philosophers largely think about. The mathematician seeking a proof of Goldbach's conjecture, the Christian theologian assessing the plausibility of a particular version of Trinitarian doctrine, the philosopher considering how, conceptually, to individuate material objects one from another, the biologist constructing experiments to test and describe the difference between the cognitive habits of the octopus and the dolphin, the astronomer synthesizing data about black holes—these are all intellectuals thinking about the nonhuman world. And, of course, being obsessively interested in ourselves, we think about the human world. That's the province of historians, literary critics, political theorists, musicologists, linguists, and so on. Musicologists thinking about the significance of how dissonance and assonance affect synaptic firing in the brain, historians uncovering and narrating details of the Taiping Rebellion, literary critics providing thematic and semantic analysis of Murasaki Shikibu's work, political theorists arguing about the definition of the state—these are all intellectuals thinking about the human world.

We humans do these things. They're among the most distinctively human of the things we do, even though the great majority of us either doesn't do them at all, or does them only occasionally, and at second- or thirdhand. It seems reasonable, then, to ask, as you do, how to prepare for doing them. I'll try to answer.

You don't offer in your letter any definition of what an intellectual is, and that's just as well. Thought doesn't have to proceed by way of definition (although it can); often, appeal to clear cases of the phenomenon under discussion is preferable, and I take you to be providing some such in your list of people whose works have impressed you, and whom you'd like, in one way or another, to emulate. It's an impressive, miscellaneous, and interesting list, remarkable for one of your age.

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“I’ve delighted in and been awed by the works of the following people,” you write.

They’re the ones I’d like to be like, and it’s reading them that’s made me think that the best label for what I want to be is “intellectual.” Here’s the list: Augustine, Seneca, Vasubandhu, Asanga, Tsong-kha-pa, Dōgen, Maimonides, Pascal, Locke, Hume, Kant, J. H. Newman, Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Iris Murdoch, Susan Sontag, Edith Stein, Gillian Rose, George Steiner, Bruno Latour, Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Marion.

These people write about different things, and they certainly don’t agree with one another. They include a Buddhist metaphysician with systematic aspirations writing in Tibetan; a Platonist novelist-cum-philosopher writing in English; an overexcitable Christian theologian writing about everything (almost) in Latin; a gnomic semi-Nazi political theorist writing in German; an American cultural theorist and public intellectual (so-called) writing in English; a half-mystic deploying the poetical and conceptual resources of the Buddhist tradition writing in Japanese; and a phenomenology-obsessed Catholic writing in French. What have they in common?

I think at least the following.

First, ambition: Each of these thinkers wants it all, intellectually speaking. In their respective spheres they intend to outthink, out-narrate, out-argue, and generally outdo their predecessors and contemporaries. Augustine, for

example, thinks history through, all of it, and narrates it in such a way as to show its Christian form; in doing that, he writes one of the largest and most ambitious works to have been produced in the West in late antiquity. Rose takes Hegel and Marx and reads them in such a way as to produce an understanding of the state transverse to and subversive of all the major trends in European political theory in the twentieth century. Tsong-kha-pa, familiar with the entire Indo-Tibetan Buddhist textual tradition, composes, among other things, a massive, systematic work that embraces and orders every aspect of the practice of Buddhism. Marion rereads the entirety of the phenomenological tradition with the goal of showing it, against all its major competitors, to be first philosophy, and it alone, properly construed, to be capable of depicting and elucidating the fundamental structure of human experience.

Second, obsessive energy and focus: These are all thinkers whose work extends over the course of their lives (some long, some short), and to whose lives, as far as we can tell, the intellectual work was central. They return to their themes, their questions, like dogs worrying over bones: Pascal worries at grace in this way, Sontag at pain and pleasure, Dōgen at the relation between concept and experience, Schmitt at the structure of the state. What these people wrote has an obsessive tone: These are people who can't leave what they're thinking about alone. It's not just something they did to make a living, or to get tenure, or to advance their reputation. They did it, or so the texture of their work suggests, because they really wanted a deeper understanding. And if the thing they're thinking about is difficult, it won't easily be exhausted. Most of the people on your list continued to think and write about their topics as long as they lived.

Third, the people you've read and are impressed by attend principally to the human world. It's us, we and our artifacts and habits and practices and possibilities, that interest them. They think about the nonhuman world, for the most part, only as it has connections with and effects upon us. There are no mathematicians (except, in part, Pascal) and no experimental or

theoretical scientists among them. This isn't necessarily a problem. I take it to mean that, should you pursue an intellectual vocation, it will be in that sphere. But the limitation in your list suggests a caution: Don't think that the vocation of intellectuals is found only or preeminently among those who attend to the human. The tools of thought and the capacity to use them are needed just as much by those who think about the nonhuman world, and I recommend that, as you continue to think about the shape of your particular intellectual vocation, you read, experimentally, those who've devoted their intellectual lives, in part or whole, to doing that. You might start with Aristotle in his natural-scientific moments, sample the Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika in their ontological-categorizing aspect, and end with E. O. Wilson on ants.

What you want to think about, then, I suspect, what inflames your intellectual appetite, are difficult and large questions: topics with a long history of being thought and written about, and topics whose complexity is sufficient to require a life's worth of thought. What should you do in order to prepare yourself for such a life?

The first requirement is that you find something to think about. This may be easy to arrive at, or almost impossibly difficult. It's something like falling in love. There's an infinite number of topics you might think about, just as there's an almost infinite number of people you might fall in love with. But in neither case is the choice made by consulting all possibilities and choosing among them. You can only love what you see, and what you see is given, in large part, by location and chance. Among those you see are some you love; and among them, perhaps, is some particular one with whom you'd like your life to be intertwined. So with topics for thought. Your gaze is drawn, a flirtation begins, you learn more, you find some interlocutors, and, sometimes before you know it, your topic is before you and your intellectual course is set. There's no algorithm for this: It'll happen or it won't.

From your letter, and especially from your list of people you like to read, I think that at the moment you're in love with the idea of being an intellectual

rather than with some topic for thought. You'd like to be the kind of person who writes books like *Regarding the Pain of Others* or the *Lam-rim chen-mo*, rather than being already deeply enmeshed in the toils of thought about some particular topic. This may be a sign that you're not yet serious, that, as Augustine said of himself in his salad days, you're in love with love rather than simply in love. Most people who'd love to be novelists don't write novels, and that's because they're not really interested in doing so. They're infatuated with an image and a rôle rather than with what those who play that rôle do. So, perhaps, with you; if so, the infatuation will fade as you grow older, and you'll do something closer to the rough ground of material necessity.

But the miscellaneity and eclecticism of your reading list also suggest something else, something rather more interesting. Perhaps you'll be a dilettante: You'll love what you think about and you'll think hard about it, but you'll be easily bored and won't think about anything for long. You'll read many things and (perhaps) write many, but you'll read and write about disparate topics, and once you've read for a while about something, and perhaps written about it, you'll move on to something else. Clever people—quick studies—are often like this. They have properly intellectual gifts, but they lack the patience for attention's long, slow gaze (on which see below), and so their intellectual life coruscates, sparking here and there like a firefly on the porch, but illuminating nothing for long. Some of the people you've read and delighted in have something of this about them. It's partly true of Augustine and Newman, for example, and of Sontag.

I'd like to warn you against this tendency. It's not that there's anything deeply wrong with it. Suggestive and stimulating work can be done by dilettantes, and, as the label suggests, they tend to be true lovers of what they think about, even if they don't think about it for long. Neither is there any sharp and bright line between the work of dilettantes and that of intellectuals properly speaking; the categories shade into one another, and it's usually possible to find, even in the work of the most dilettantish, threads that make a single fabric. It's not going to be easy to say when an intellectual becomes a

dilettante or a dilettante an intellectual. There are, however, clear cases here, too, and the extent to which you embrace dilettantism is just the extent to which you won't do serious intellectual work.

A final warning about topics. They don't have to be things you love or like, and it's here that the analogy with falling in love breaks down. It's entirely possible to spend a life thinking about something you find rebarbative, such as (for me) Stalinism, cricket, and gamelan music—I don't know your tastes well enough to be able to say what would be on your list of dislikes. What's required is that it be interesting, not that it be beloved. There's as much intellectual red meat to chew on in something unlovely as there is in something lovely, and since the intellect works, in large part, by discrimination and distinction, analyzing what's wrong with something may be more intellectually productive than showing what's right about it. The advice here is: Don't follow your loves but, rather, what provokes thought in you. The two may be the same, but they certainly don't have to be.

So: Find something to think about that seems to you to have complexity sufficient for long work, sufficient to yield multifaceted and refractory results when held up to thought's light as jewelers hold gemstones up to their loupes. And then, don't stop thinking about it.

The second requirement is time: You need a life in which you can spend a minimum of three uninterrupted hours every day, excepting sabbaths and occasional vacations, on your intellectual work. Those hours need to be free from distractions: no telephone calls, no email, no texts, no visits. Just you. Just thinking and whatever serves as a direct aid to and support of thinking (reading, writing, experiment, etc.). Nothing else. You need this because intellectual work is, typically, cumulative and has momentum. It doesn't leap from one eureka moment to the next, even though there may be such moments in your life if you're fortunate. No, it builds slowly from one day to the next, one month to the next. Whatever it is you're thinking about will demand of you that you think about it a lot and for a long time, and you won't

be able to do that if you're distracted from moment to moment, or if you allow long gaps between one session of work and the next. Undistracted time is the space in which intellectual work is done: It's the space for that work in the same way that the factory floor is the space for the assembly line.

This is a difficult requirement to meet, even though it's a simple one to understand. Most people's lives don't permit it: They spend, and must spend, most of their waking hours pursuing the goods necessary for survival, and the few breaks in those routines are short and unpredictable. Three hours a day, every day, of unbroken, undistracted time, is an unimaginable luxury for most people, now and in the past. But you're writing to me from the richest country in the world, in which a significant slice of the population has that luxury, or could have it with a little discipline and imagination. Having a full-time bread-earning job doesn't necessarily prevent it. (Faulkner, it's said, wrote *As I Lay Dying* during the hours between midnight and 4 a.m. while working the night shift at a power plant.) Neither does being married or a parent of children—though full-time caring for infants, small children, the sick, or the old, without help, effectively does. Because you live where you live, and because your life has already afforded you the luxury of time for reading and thinking, it's probable that you can meet this requirement if you want to. You might need to discipline your appetites for food, drink, clothes, sex, and amusement, because those are all expensive; you might need to renounce some of the consumer goods you're told you can't live without; and some of your relationships might suffer. But it's possible. You're young: You can begin to plan for it now. You should begin to plan for it now.

With undistracted time comes solitude, and along with it, usually, loneliness. These can be affectively unpleasant. But there's a lot to be learned from them. When loneliness obtrudes, tugging at your sleeve, invite it in as accompaniment to your work. Its company will provide unexpected texture to your time of thinking, and may help that activity as often as hinder it. Learn to be alone for your time of work.

The third requirement is training. Once you know what you want to think about, you need to learn whatever skills are necessary for good thinking about it, and whatever body of knowledge is requisite for such thinking. These days we tend to think of this as requiring university studies. It may, but need not. The dominance of the university is fairly recent. Moreover, some of the people on your list were formed and developed their thinking outside the academy. So don't confuse training with degrees.

The most essential skill is surprisingly hard to come by. That skill is attention. Intellectuals always think about something, and that means they need to know how to attend to what they're thinking about. Attention can be thought of as a long, slow, surprised gaze at whatever it is. Perhaps what you think about is camels: how they got to be what they are; what, indeed, they are; how to account for their physiognomy and habits; what capacities they have; what uses they might have for humans; how they appear in literature and song; what it's like to ride them. Camels are surprising enough on the face of it, but so, really, is everything. That there is anything at all to think about, and that we can think about it: These are the first surprises, and those who think about those curious states of affairs are, I suppose, metaphysicians and theologians. They need to attend to their topic no more and no less than do camel-fanciers.

The long, slow, surprised gaze requires cultivation. We're quickly and easily habituated, with the result that once we've seen something a few times it comes to seem unsurprising, and if it's neither threatening nor useful it rapidly becomes invisible. There are many reasons for this (the necessities of survival; the fact of the Fall), but whatever a full account of those might be ("full account" being itself a matter for thinking about), their result is that we can't easily attend.

You'll get bored. You, if you're remotely like me, enjoy distraction. You'll too rapidly think you've exhausted whatever it is you're looking at and thinking about. In fact, nothing can be exhausted: no artifact, no feature of the

nonhuman world, no person, no set of relations, no abstraction. The set of real numbers may seem, at first blush, sufficiently clear in its definition and parameters to need ten minutes' thought and no more, but in fact it opens out into an endless world of abstract relations. (You'll quite soon be thinking, for instance, about such things as the cardinality of the set of natural numbers.) The good mathematician knows how to attend in such a way that this world shows the inexhaustibility of seemingly simple, matter-of-fact numerical properties, and in such a way as to yield, sometimes, with luck and application, new paths of thought and solutions to old problems. So, *mutatis mutandis*, for camels, novels by Henry James, the American Civil War, the algorithmics of meliorating traffic jams, the doctrine of the Trinity (no less than the Trinity itself)—and, to ratchet upward for a moment, for the question of how to individuate one topic of thought from another, answers to which are assumed by everything written in this paragraph.

How then to overcome boredom and cultivate attention? How to learn to look at the same thing, or set of things, again and again, in such a way that more of its aspects show themselves and more problems and solutions are suggested by it? There's no twelve-step for this. Rather, it's a matter, first, of knowing that attention is necessary for intellectual work and that it will, when practiced, bear unexpected fruit, and that it won't, no matter what seems to be the case, exhaust what it's turned to. Then, it's a matter of knowing that you'll be bored by what you're thinking about, ceasing to be surprised by that dry response, and accommodating it into the patterns of your attention (see above, on the relation between solitude and loneliness). And lastly, it's a matter of practice by repetition, like piano-playing and squash. You'll get better at attending as you do it, so long as you know you need to get better at it.

Although there's no failsafe recipe for developing attention, there are ways to nurture it. Among these, intentionally engaging in repetitive activity is important. Practicing a musical instrument, attending Mass daily, meditating on the rhythms of your breath, taking the same walk every day (Kant in

Königsberg)—all these can foster attentiveness to particulars if you do them with that in mind. They can help you see that every particular is inexhaustible, and that boredom's need for distraction is, at bottom, an inability to attend to what's in front of you.

There's a further benefit: As you learn to cultivate attention over time, you'll find that your first-personal sense of being the one who is attending will become attenuated. You'll become filled with and conformed to what you're attending to, and for one so filled, there's little room for self-awareness, much less self-congratulation. This conformity to what you're attending to is boredom's principal cure, for boredom's principal characteristic is exactly an excessive self-presence. Close and repeated attention to one or another aspect of the world, which is what an intellectual does, is its cure.

So far I've been writing about training in particular skills, "know-how," as it's often called. You'll need plenty of that as your intellectual life develops. But you'll also need fluency in a body of knowledge: knowledge about the kind of thing you're thinking about (mathematical or anthropological or literary knowledge) sufficiently deep in your bones that you can deploy it with as much ease as you speak and write your first language. Knowing-that isn't cleanly distinguishable from knowing-how, and doesn't need to be, but it is useful to bear the distinction between them in mind if only because it's characteristic of intellectuals that they seek more knowledge-that than is usual, or than is needed for most pursuits. You can be a virtuoso pianist or baseball player or mechanic or speaker of English without being able to give as full an account of what you're doing as an intellectual will typically want to do. Thinking about something, that is, while itself a skill of a kind not unlike that of the mechanic, includes in its purposes being able to provide an account of what's being thought about fuller than the one required for being able to think about it. The baseball player doesn't need to be able to give an account of his fast-twitch muscle reflexes in order to be able to hit an incoming 95-mph pitch; the intellectual whose object is the mechanics of baseball needs to be able to do exactly that. (Intellectuals are also often

interested in offering accounts of what they themselves do; this essay contains some elements of that, but this is epiphenomenal rather than a necessary feature of the intellectual life.)

There is, you'll find, a delight in extending knowledge—that. As you come to know more about whatever it is, you'll find yourself seeing new connections and finding new puzzlements. It's not a matter of simple additive accumulation; it's rather a matter of reweaving and augmenting a web, so that it becomes both more complex and more beautiful.

Once, then, you've decided on your topic, you'll need to figure out not only the know-how required for thinking about it, but also the body of knowledge presupposed by thought about it. That will be the content of your training. And that leads to the fourth requirement of the intellectual life.

That fourth requirement is interlocutors. You can't develop the needed skills or appropriate the needed body of knowledge without them. You can't do it by yourself. Solitude and loneliness, yes, very well; but that solitude must grow out of and continually be nourished by conversation with others who've thought and are thinking about what you're thinking about. Those are your interlocutors. They may be dead, in which case they'll be available to you in their postmortem traces: written texts, recordings, reports by others, and so on. Or they may be living, in which case you may benefit from face-to-face interactions, whether public or private. But in either case, you need them. You can neither decide what to think about nor learn to think about it well without getting the right training, and the best training is to be had by apprenticeship: Observe the work—or the traces of the work—of those who've done what you'd like to do; try to discriminate good instances of such work from less good; and then be formed by imitation.

This raises a difficulty. Where are such interlocutors to be found? The answer these days, as you must already know, is: mostly in the universities of the West and their imitators and progeny elsewhere. That, disproportionately, is where those with an intellectual life are provided the resources to live it, and

that, notionally, is the institutional form we've developed for nurturing such lives. I write "notionally" because in fact much about universities (I've been in and around them since 1975) is antipathetic to the intellectual life, and most people in universities, faculty and students included, have never had and never wanted an intellectual life. They're there for other reasons.

Nevertheless, on the faculty of every university I've worked at, there are real intellectuals: people whose lives are dedicated to thinking in the way I've described here. Service on tenure committees—the committees that assess the worth of the work faculty are doing—at R1 universities these past two decades convinces me of this. And so: If you want living interlocutors, the university is where you're most likely to find them.

You shouldn't, however, assume that this means you must follow the usual routes into professional academia: undergraduate degree, graduate degrees, a faculty position, tenure. That's a possibility, but if you follow it, you should take care to keep your eyes on the prize, which in this case is an intellectual life. The university will, if you let it, distract you from that by professionalizing you, which is to say, by offering you a series of rewards not for being an intellectual, but for being an academic, which is not at all the same thing. What you want is time and space to think, the skills and knowledge to think well, and interlocutors to think with. If the university provides you with these, well and good; if it doesn't, or doesn't look as though it will, leave it alone.

The university's importance as a place of face-to-face interlocution about intellectual matters is diminishing in any case. Universities are moving, increasingly, toward interlocution at a distance, via the Internet. This fact, coupled with the possibility of good conversation with the dead by way of their texts, suggests that for those whose intellectual vocation doesn't require expensive ancillaries (laboratories, telescopes, hadron colliders, powerful computers, cadres of research subjects, and the like), they should be one place among many to look for interlocutors. You should, in any case, not assume that what you need in order to have an intellectual life is a graduate

degree. You might be better served by assuming that you don't, and getting one only if it seems the sole route by which you can get the interlocution and other training you need. That is rarely the case. If it turns out that your intellectual work does require expensive ancillaries, you're in a more difficult situation, unless you have great private wealth. Then, you'll need a sponsor: a university, a corporation, the apparatus of a state, a think tank.

So: Seek the interlocutors you need by attending closely to work of the sort you hope to do. Model yourself upon it. Learn how it's done. Take it apart to examine its workings. Replicate it, if you can. Comment upon it. Gloss it. Perform pastiche upon it. Where and in what setting you do these things is deeply secondary to the fact of doing it. Interlocution in these modes will train you by giving you the know-how and the knowledge-that you need.

And lastly: Don't do any of the things I've recommended unless it seems to you that you must. The world doesn't need many intellectuals. Most people have neither the talent nor the taste for intellectual work, and most that is admirable and good about human life (love, self-sacrifice, justice, passion, martyrdom, hope) has little or nothing to do with what intellectuals do. Intellectual skill, and even intellectual greatness, is as likely to be accompanied by moral vice as moral virtue. And the world—certainly the American world—has little interest in and few rewards for intellectuals. The life of an intellectual is lonely, hard, and usually penurious; don't undertake it if you hope for better than that. Don't undertake it if you think the intellectual vocation the most important there is: It isn't. Don't undertake it if you have the least tincture in you of contempt or pity for those without intellectual talents: You shouldn't. Don't undertake it if you think it will make you a better person: It won't. Undertake it if, and only if, nothing else seems possible.

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