



The Examined Life

Grounded in classic texts, the Lincoln Scholars program considers the human condition and what we owe one another.

By Angelica Hankins

In his *Confessions*, Saint Augustine encounters a beggar in Milan. The man is poor and drunk; he weighs on Augustine's already burdened conscience. But there's something peculiar about the beggar: He's unabashedly happy. He's "enjoying his intoxication," we learn, while Augustine is "laden with anxieties and fears." What am I toiling after, Augustine asks, when this man has found a short-lived, but not unreal, joy?

It's one of the questions posed in *The Examined Life*, a seminar in American University's Lincoln Scholars program. A certificate for first- and second-year students, the program is rooted in the study of classic texts and the value of intellectual curiosity, of living critically in the here and now. As Thomas Merrill, program director and a professor of government in the School of Public Affairs, puts it, "Our job as a university is to be the home of the questions."

When Christopher Utter, associate director of the Lincoln Scholars program, put the question of Augustine and the beggar to his class last fall, one student offered: Could the two men hold different views of happiness? Perhaps Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be applied, another

suggested, with Augustine and the beggar on separate planes. At this, Utter, a professorial lecturer in the Department of Government, turned to a passage a few pages on, in which Augustine contemplates the Epicurean way of life: "If we were immortal, and lived in a state of perpetual bodily pleasure

without any fear of losing it, why should we not be happy?" Put another way, if one were tethered to a morphine machine and felt nothing but joy, and joy without end, can that be called the good life?

One student balked at the question: How can you know what pleasure is when you haven't experienced pain? If you never face a trial, another added, you'll never learn, much less grow. It's a notion born out in these texts: To struggle is to live.

At issue here are questions about "what it means to be human, to seek something beyond yourself," says Allison Hastings-Wottowa, SIS/BA '24. The program is fundamentally truth-seeking and generous in

spirit, predicated on an "openness to having your mind changed."

This past November, literary scholar and classicist Daniel Mendelsohn, the Charles Ranlett Flint Professor of Humanities at Bard College, took up the idea in the annual Lincoln Scholars

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lecture. Centered on *The Odyssey*, which he translated last year, the discussion hinged on the title character’s estrangement and his seemingly interminable return to Ithaca. As Mendelsohn explained, Odysseus’s name derives from the Greek verb *odussomai*, meaning to both inflict and suffer pain. “To live as a human being,” he continued, is to experience hardship. “That is our condition.”

But it’s not hardship for its own sake. Instead, it’s a life of the mind, a journey toward self-knowledge. That is what Augustine is after—an understanding of his motivations, his actions reasoned through, his ideas thoughtfully considered. For him, to be blind to one’s misdeeds—the “unbridled licentiousness” and “boorishness that defies belief” of his students at Carthage, for instance—is to live in ignorance. That, he concludes, is its own punishment. So too, in Homer’s second epic, which turns not so much on the hero’s physical might as on his restless mind. As Mendelsohn asserts: Forgetfulness is “the greatest danger that faces Odysseus and his men.”

Conversely, to be observant, to question the world in all its complexity, is a kind of gift. Consider Frederick Douglass’s 1852 speech “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”—one of the assigned texts in the program. The nation’s founders were men of conviction, Douglass notes, who “staked their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor, on the cause of their country.” They believed in order, he says, “but not in the order of tyranny.” He swiftly pivots to the tyrannical slave trade, to the men who were “examined like horses,” the women, “brutally exposed.” Douglass here is holding up the founders’ vision against the reality that surrounds him and, finding it lacking, doesn’t resign himself to despair. He concludes: I “leave off where I began, with hope.”

Douglass is willing to wander. He’s willing to follow one line of thought, then another, knowing he will arrive at something richer as a result. Merrill calls this “doing justice to the question”—exploring all the ways a query might be considered. The aim of the seminar, he maintains, is “cultivating attention to fundamental questions of living and learning to contemplate those questions in the intellectual company of other human beings.”

These classes are capacious; they conjure up a world boundless but not unnavigable, in keeping with the texts themselves. Their books center on “the unknown, the unexplainable questions of the universe,” says Liliana Sandfort, CAS/BA ’28. It’s a new way of looking at “what we structure our lives around,” the ideas “we grapple with every day.”

The journey can be arduous. The assigned books are intricately layered and meticulously plotted. “The experience of the text,” Merrill says, “is trying to interpret something

ambiguous.” To puzzle out a narrative’s deeper meaning, to consider its implications, is its own reward—a way of understanding both the work and one’s self. Mary Shelley, another assigned author, has that mental dexterity about her. She takes a question—what Frankenstein owes his Creature, for instance—and draws it out skillfully, inflecting her characters with a fine interiority. Hers is a world of violence, indeed, but also of invention, of seeing oneself and the other anew.

Shelley was “singularly bold, somewhat imperious, and active of mind,” her father once observed. “Her desire of knowledge is great and her perseverance in everything she undertakes, almost invincible.” To arrive at a critical perspective is to ask questions, to follow winding paths. Odysseus is “brilliantly complex,” as Mendelsohn notes, and it’s precisely that complexity, the turns of his mind, that hold the reader, leading him still further into the thrilling unknown.

In this, there are no easy answers. If a student suggests one in a Lincoln Scholars seminar, it’s quickly interrogated, refined, made sharper and more meaningful. “If that is true, what else is true?” is a common refrain. “What are the implications, the risks?” The text, then, is a kind of rudder, Merrill says, keeping the discussion on course lest it veer into airless opining. The result is a class where students tread carefully but purposefully, weaving together something more substantive than any single view would allow.

The authors here are in conversation with one another, at once building on and reimagining established points of view. Take Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, which describes women in literature (“If being a woman is not a defect, it is at least a peculiarity”) in light of Aristotle’s views (“The female is female by virtue of a certain *lack* of qualities”). Beauvoir is effectively arguing that the limits placed on women

are not new; they are ingrained in the very foundations of the Western canon.

In *Women and Economics*, one of the texts in the program’s Roots of Political Economy course, novelist Charlotte Perkins Gilman considers the value of community kitchens, a point not unlike Plato’s in *The Republic* concerning collective childcare, and the labor and time the investment would save. To read these texts together is to plumb the depth of their arguments, to understand the expansiveness of their propositions and the guiding principles in which they are rooted.

One of the program’s principles concerns the value of reading closely. The first time readers pick up a book, Merrill asserts, they are like tourists in a new city. They “don’t know which way is north.” It’s only when one returns to the text a second and third time that ideas spring forth, that the reader is able to make a reasoned judgment. Consider *Hamlet*, where the title character is terrifically flawed, paralyzed

by his own self-doubt. Understanding those flaws and one’s reaction to them is crucial, Merrill says. These texts “require you to exercise your own critical judgment.” Hastings-Wottowa, who’s reread *Frankenstein* three times, concurs: These texts “teach you how to evaluate a notion you thought to be true, how to have a conversation with yourself, allowing your thoughts to grow.”

There’s a requisite vulnerability to this kind of reading. To immerse yourself in a world not your own, to accept that your ideas will be challenged, is an act of faith, a belief that open discourse is worthwhile, that you’ll come away with a better sense not just of others, but of yourself. That unguarded posture is at the heart of the Lincoln Scholars program. “If there’s something you care about, you need to understand the strongest argument against it,” Merrill contends. “Are you able to step outside of your beliefs?”

Inherent in this is a sort of empathy, an ability to see things from a new vantage point. Sandfort remembers studying *Pride and Prejudice* in one of her Lincoln Scholars classes. The discussion centered

on the novel’s protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, not as a figure of Regency-era Britain, but as a flesh-and-blood woman “on a journey of self-knowledge,” finding her place in a closely scrutinized society. That is the novel’s enduring quality, Sandfort says—what brings it surprisingly and beautifully into the present. “You can’t force people to think differently,” Merrill asserts, “but you can model a different way of being.”

Augustine’s way of being is ruminative, poring over his actions and their reverberations. When he sees the beggar, something in him is challenged, his conception of joy turned on its head. He realizes later that he’s not after the beggar’s joy but something richer. So, too, in *The Odyssey*, when the ghost of Achilles visits the title character. Having chosen to die young and receive eternal glory, Achilles confides in Odysseus: “I’d rather be a serf working another man’s land . . . than rule as king of all the perished dead.” Life is a trial, he suggests, but one worth enduring. For his part, Augustine is after that selfless joy, “the light of a goodness, a beauty, which deserved to be embraced for its own sake.”

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FOUNDED IN 2019 by Professor Thomas Merrill, the Lincoln Scholars program encourages students to think critically about the fundamental questions of life. Modeled after a similar program at St. John’s College, Lincoln Scholars seminars are grounded in political theory, philosophy, economics, and literature. Each year, the program admits about 50 students, who apply as part of their university applications. While most enrollees are from the School of Public Affairs and the School of International Service, Lincoln Scholars classes are open to students from across the university. Some program graduates have gone on to law school; others have pursued doctoral degrees; and still others have entered careers in politics, global development, and other fields.