In the past year, my understanding of the world, and thus, my hopes for the project were greatly transformed. It became clear that to choose and work on a single problem, and to consequently address peace through it, in Ethiopia would be a difficult and futile undertaking: for in the last year, alone, Ethiopia, declared a civil war, in addition to the continued effects of the Pandemic.

The problem Goh identified and hoped to understand was within the education system: its goal should no longer be to supply people with a rushing stream of knowledge. The Goh initiative, therefore, evolved its mission to the introduction of the Great Books to the Ethiopian youth. It was not directed to alter the educational system or any system, for there is too much of that happening, and the Ethiopian people have lost trust in the reliability of themselves and the spoken knowledge of others.

In the months leading up to the project, I reached out to and interviewed website developers, hired contractors, to help me with marketing and recruitment, as well as, compiling a comprehensive reading list. During these initial steps, the ever-changing political climate threatened to halt the project. Those hired found it difficult to work amidst the growing turmoil, and our pool of applicants were dispersed around the country: in different ethnic regions, with different sets of beliefs, and we were weary that they would, understandably, hesitate or refuse to converse with those who were from a region different from theirs. I knew, from my time studying the Great Books, that the texts along with the Socratic-styled seminars would lessen the chance of personalized conversations, if followed well; I, therefore, turned my attention to the reading list.

I worked to ensure that our reading list presented the various and seemingly disconnected expressions of Truth behind the studies of philosophy, mathematics, sciences, and the arts. Whether the subject is literature or quantum mechanics, I wanted, participants to do the talking with a focus on the text and little to no dependence on pre-learned or preconceived notions of the topic, even if one is trained in that field. We then undertook the arduous task of selecting: one text for a mathematics tutorial, two texts for literature, two texts for the natural sciences, one text for psychology, one text for music (The Pentatonic Melodies: Tezeta), and five texts for philosophy; and true to our aim, we questioned to find out why we think certain thinkers such as Ptolemy were wrong and why we say that like Einstein, are right.

What Goh was attempting to do was unheard of in Ethiopia, and, even in the Western academic institutions where the study of the Great Books takes a few years, if not the whole of one’s academic journey, one’s interaction with them is filled with challenges and hesitations. The project, for the sake of ease, took place in the course of two sessions and limited its number of participants: from the fifty applications we had received, we selected ten participants who we thought would complement each other. Our sessions ran for four weeks, each, and due to the varying schedules of the participants, they were conducted online via Zoom on Sundays. Every Sunday began with a seminar, a 2-hour Socratic-styled dialogue on a selected Great Book, and ended with a short tutorial on the sciences and arts. We recognized the intellectual intimacy that seminars such as ours required, and were, therefore, insistently to keep our numbers small and focus our resources more on those selected for this year’s session—and what we saw, later on, affirmed our decision to do so.

In these sessions, we, all of the participants and tutors, did not approve of the texts nor each other; we, instead, read, listened, and spoke of the questions that have shaped, and will continue to shape, mankind. We found, as a whole, in the selected texts, that rudimentary concepts such as a triangle,
sonnets, or war and peace were not as we had initially surmised, and through that formed a willingness, on all our behalf's, we turned our gaze away from repeated ideas and to our abundant thinking.

The participants, once accustomed to the method of the seminars, demonstrated unmatched interest in the texts—often challenging the authors and themselves with either understanding old propositions or coming up with new theories—and a commendable respect for each other’s thoughts. In the walls of our virtual rooms, our differences, though not our primary focus, were understood and celebrated. Often, when presented with a thought much different from theirs, they would patiently ask for clarification and listen without prejudice. The project became theirs as much as it was mine. My, and the guest tutors’ presence, was to solely guide; and with that, it was moving to witness the required bravery in a united examination of our roles and contributions to the world and, even more, in stating that we perhaps did not know a concept that we once had sworn on its infallibility. Such a flexibility, to ourselves and each other, was imparted beyond the project. Participants reported, throughout and after the conclusion of the project, of having sensed a change in their thinking and relationship to the world at large; and many, asked for the seminars to be continued yearly.

Between the war, our personal challenges, and delays with hired contractors, I continuously doubted the completion of the project; but just as the participants challenged their thought, often finding, for themselves, a new path, I, too, found my wariness to be utterly wrong. We tried, to the best of our abilities, to foresee possible challenges, and did not shy away from challenges. The sessions, as stated before, took place online; when students could not participate due to internet connectivity issues in their areas—as in the repeated case of a student who participated from a monastery on a mountain—we provided internet packages, as well as, technical support; and when there were absences on the unpredictable election days, the participants made it a point to schedule additional seminars. The project, with the help of all those involved, exceeded the bare and wanting imagined expectations. We registered the participants’ consistent comments of ‘two hours is not enough!’ and true to Plato, the father of the Western Canon, we are moving towards gaining the necessary accreditations to extend the project into an Academy in Ethiopia. It would be licensed as a private institution, for further education, and would, similarly, apply the seminar styled and Great Books centered discussions as St. John’s College. Our inclination to expand the bounds of Goh has sprouted from the reactions of all those involved. We have been struck by the seamless integration of the Program within our humble community, and feel it would be unjust to conclude its journey prematurely; especially when all of us involved have seen and formed a notion of peace that has been crafted by our own thinking rod.