

# THE LEFT ATRIUM

## Room for a view

### Microbes of the soul

“Hermann Hesse has carried on his battle against these microbes of the soul in the field of literature. ... He shouts to all of us the motto of young Joseph Knecht in *Das Glasperlenspiel* [*The Glass Bead Game*]: ‘... Advance, mount higher, conquer yourself! For to be human is to suffer an incurable duality, to be drawn toward both good and evil. And we can achieve harmony and peace only when we have killed the selfishness within us.’” — remarks made by Sigurd Curman, President of the Royal Academy of Sciences, at the Nobel Banquet, Stockholm, Sweden, Dec. 10, 1946.

Fifty years nearly to the day that author Hermann Hesse was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, I was handed a copy of his last novel, *The Glass Bead Game* (*Magister Ludi*). It tells the “history” of a monastic intellectual order that worships scholarship in the fictional province of Castalia. Promising young schoolboys are brought here to pursue a life of the mind in isolation from the messy outside world of politics, work and family. They may study mathematics or astronomy; or, if they are truly gifted, they may become Glass Bead Game players. The Game, Hesse’s narrator tells us, was established when the 20th century ended in wars; it was created by a handful of learned, hopeful men in response to what had been a global shallow fascination with images and deeds.

My copy of the book was a gift from a senior lab-mate, congratulating me for finishing my master of science degree. At the time, it played a passionate fugue on my study-worn heartstrings. It honoured an exquisite

understanding of the whole of human art, science and culture: *this* was my hope for education. But after 7 years of university, I needed to leave my ivy-covered lab, and I struck out for the world of international development and journalism.

That was in 1996. As the years passed, my disenchantment with formal education wore off, and I felt an

as bright young medical students. I will attempt to explain my riddle.

*The Glass Bead Game* follows the life of Joseph Knecht, who becomes the Game’s unrivalled Magister Ludi, or “Master of the Game.” On the eve of Joseph’s entry as a boy to Castalia, the man who selects him for training takes him to the mountains for a period of meditation. When Joseph reveals his

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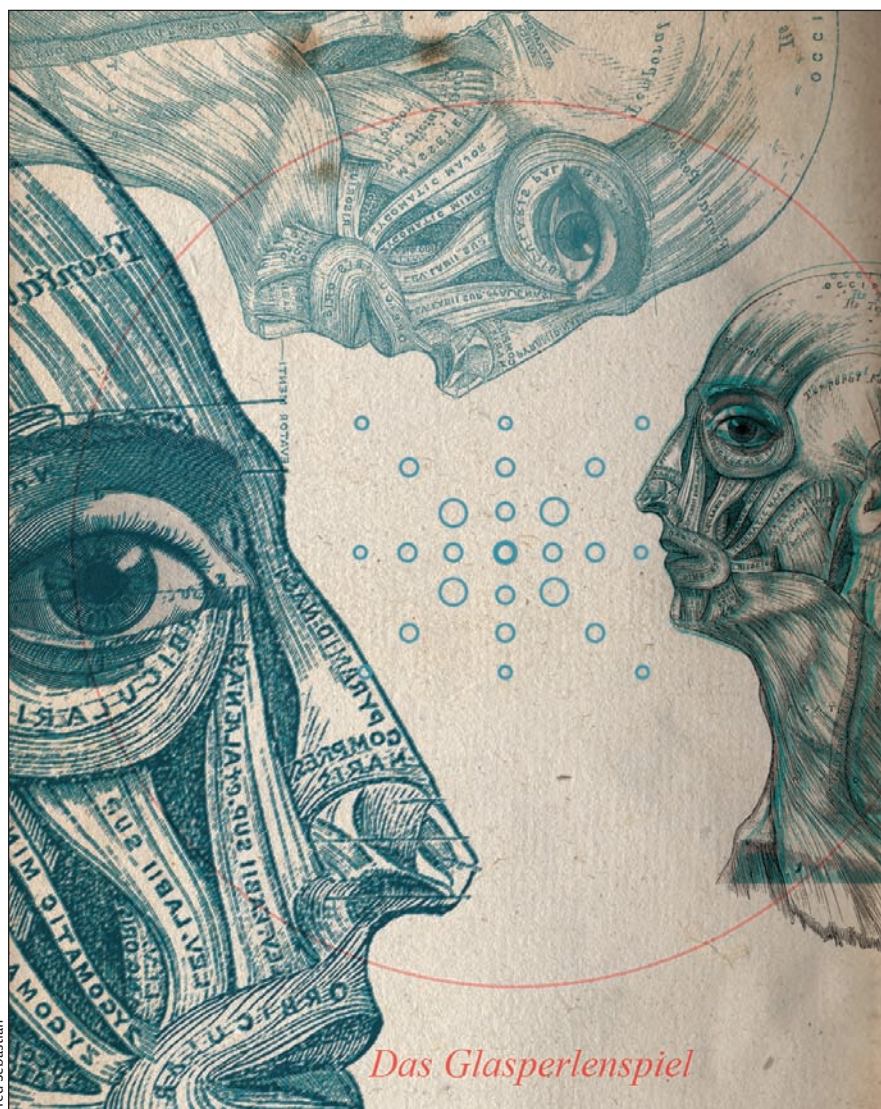
urge to return. Now, 2 years into medical school, I am once again reaching for *The Glass Bead Game*. This time I am looking not only for a justification of general curiosity, but for the book’s message on what, for me, is a central dilemma of medical education: Is it to serve oneself, or to serve the world?

### Joseph, Plinio and Father Jacobus

*The Glass Bead Game* has to do with self-interest versus duty in the context of higher education. It has nothing to do with medicine ... or does it? For now, I invite you to substitute the gates of Castalia for the walls of an average medical school. Imagine the Game as the undergraduate medical curriculum, players

interest in the Game, his patron warns him that the Game can divide people: at its worst, the Game fostered amateur virtuosity; at its best, it trained a man “to be able to exchange his discipline or art for any other.”

Thus warned and inspired, young Joseph enters Waldzell, the school within Castalia dedicated to training Game players. There he meets Plinio Designori, a “hospitant” — one of the boys from old families who had performed services for Castalia and were owed favours. Hospitants go through the elite school as temporary guests, destined for leadership roles in the outside world. Plinio is fiercely defensive of his outside world, which teems with hard work and noisy families, poverty and elections. He loves to attack the arrogance of Castalian intellectuals:



Fred Sebastian

Your function has been to point out how natural, naïve living without discipline of the mind is bound to become a mire into which men sink, reverting to bestiality. And I for my part must remind you again and again how risky, dangerous, and ultimately sterile is a life based purely upon mind.<sup>1</sup>

If debates such as these were meant to embarrass Joseph, they backfire; through them, Joseph resolves to become an elite player of the Game. Plinio leaves the order for his outside life.

Once graduated, Joseph is sent as emissary to the monastery of Mariafels. The monastery represents an order equal and opposite to Castalia and therefore needs to be kept under surveillance. In Mariafels he meets the second of his rivals/mentors, Father Jacobus, the monastery's learned historian. Father Jacobus, too, is repulsed by

the Castalian order's self-indulgence, not because of its isolation from the outside world, but because of its deliberate ignorance of history. Certainly, Castalian players know history as far as is necessary to use it in their Game, but the rest of history — their own place and agency in it, for example — they put aside with trademark arrogance:

[Your history] consists of nothing but the history of ideas and of art. Your history is bloodless and lacking in reality ... no reality, no good and evil, no time, no yesterday, no tomorrow, nothing but an eternal, shallow, mathematical present.<sup>1</sup>

Joseph listens well to Father Jacobus, but again, Father Jacobus' challenges to Joseph's vocation serve only to strengthen Joseph's affection for the Game. He returns to Waldzell for a

visit, only to be made Magister Ludi.

Ironically, it is on the heels of his career's most shining achievement that Joseph learns to doubt. As he is busy with his new daily duties at Waldzell, Joseph is not able to return immediately to Mariafels. In his place, he sends a colleague known for his single-minded devotion to the Game, who subsequently earns only derision from Father Jacobus:

You have shown us an inexperienced, overbred, weakly, and nevertheless, I am afraid, arrogant kind of person ... this unfortunate, sensitive, overintelligent, fidgety person could spoil one's respect for your whole Province.<sup>1</sup>

This time, Joseph takes the monk's words to heart. He sees that with just a touch more isolation and arrogance, all players are in danger of being represented by this disappointing specimen. He laments to a friend:

... in our Glass Bead game we analyze those products of the sages and artists into their components, we derive rules of style and patterns of form from them, and we operate with these abstractions as though they were building blocks. Of course all this is very fine; no one will contend otherwise. But not everyone can spend his entire life breathing, eating, and drinking nothing but abstractions ... Abstractions are fine, but I think people also have to breathe air and eat bread.<sup>1</sup>

Coming from the Master of the Game, these notions amount to heresy. He begins to reflect on whether players had the right to withdraw from the world; he concludes they do not. Subsequently, he cannot continue to represent an order with which he is at odds. He petitions the board to permit him to resign as Magister and take up some post as a minor schoolmaster in the public schools. The board refuses his petition. He resigns anyway, having already arranged with his old friend Plinio to be tutor to his young son. He leaves with a heady sense of freedom, declaring "I am hungry for reality, for tasks and deeds, and also for deprivations and suffering." The day after Joseph and the boy arrive in the mountain cabin where they are to pursue scholarship, Joseph follows the boy into a lake for a cold morning swim. And there he drowns.



## A lesson for medical education?

Like many, I am at once attracted and repelled by Castalia. It is a Utopia where a thoughtful life and supple mind are humanity's highest achievements; yet it is also a place where all knowledge is already made, all the noise and clamour of discovery complete. The role of the order is to further dissect knowledge, to file it, to regard a fact as an infinitely-sided space whose every facet abuts another. In Castalia, all messiness has been abolished, and the hairy, smelly truths of human need and desire have been slowly but definitely removed, like seeds bred from oranges or thorns from roses. In the end, the Magister quits Castalia for the world, only to die on the first morning of his freedom. He collapsed when faced with the real world for which he had lately come to yearn, but for which he was sorely unprepared.

Earlier, I asked you to imagine players of the Glass Bead Game as medical students. Now I will explain my riddle. Castalians/medical students are chosen for their early virtuosity and placed in highly revered institutions. Although it may seem absurd to compare the cloistered world of Castalia to a place that trains students to be at home in humanity's darkest nooks and crannies, consider what Plinio and Father Jacobus had to say about Castalians, and what critics have often said about the medical profession: we are selfish, we are rude, we are concerned about our own pocketbooks and call schedules, we are ignorant of the sacrifices made by society at large to pay for our training and our salaries. Thus, at our worst, we can be what Father Jacobus describes as overbred, over-intelligent and arrogant.

But at our best, we can make the many broken pieces whole.

Having returned to *The Glass Bead Game*, I now see it as a cautionary tale for medical education. Joseph becomes heartsick at the thought he is serving his own intellectual desires while sacrificing duty to the world; his idealism forces him to leave the only world he knew. Put another way, the Game takes its raw material from the sum total of

human experience, yet it maintains a comfortable distance from the mess of humanity. Is this not like medicine at its worst? Medicine for doctors, rather than patients?

The story tells me that, like Joseph, I must listen to the voices of Plinio and Father Jacobus, then choose which comes first, the Game or those from whom the Game emerged. Perhaps we medical students can make change from within so that no choice needs to

be made between becoming "odious and debased," or defecting as Joseph did, only to be silenced.

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### REFERENCE

1. Hesse, H. *The Glass Bead Game (Magister Ludi)*. New York: Henry Holt & Company (Owl); 1990. English translation (1943) by Richard and Clara Winston.

### Notes

## A heartbeat shared

*The professor guides my right hand onto the full-term abdomen, placing the obstetrical stethoscope diaphragm right over where he wants it. The earpieces press hard against the insides of my ears, hurting: I'm not yet used to wearing this instrument. I listen intently, with the teacher looking at my face, enquiringly.*

*Shutting my eyes and concentrating hard, I try, amidst the muted sounds of road traffic, to hear. All I hear is a hushed hum — a dull static drone: Shh! — come on, focus, listen.*

*Suddenly, like a miracle, I learn the art of listening. As if from miles away, dull at first, then clearly, is the distant muted tick-tick, tick-tick, tick-tick — the heartbeat sounds of the unborn baby. Ensheathed and wrapped in layers of muscle and floating within its private pool of amniotic fluid — the in-utero third-trimester fetus. I am in rapt attention, afraid to move for fear of losing the magical sound — the pulsations of a tiny heart, receiving maternal blood, and then pumping it on into its own fetal circulation.*

*By the time I remember to open my eyes, the professor has moved on to the next patient. I continue holding the diaphragm against the abdomen of the young first time mother-to-be: I remove the hurting earplugs. I am so euphoric that I have, for my first time ever, heard the fetal heart sound, that I do something else. I nod my head toward the woman I am examining and pass on the twin tubes with earplugs toward her, urging her to put them on.*

*She looks puzzled. Using only gesture and mime, I get across to her that, if she wants, she can hear her own baby. She smiles and nods tentatively. I put an index finger up against my own lips to signify "silence." She nods.*

*It took a minute or two, then I see the most radiant of smiles a person can ever see. The young woman beams, radiating a thousand watts. Her eyes widen and she shakes her head, incredulous. She clutches on to the metal tubes, pressing them harder against her ears, quivering, afraid of losing the aural ripples from her insides — her own baby's heart, pulsing with the kinetics of life. A tiny cardiac pump that will continue, relentlessly, to contract and expand, through a lifetime.*

It has been years now since I heard that faint, yet distinct beat at a free government hospital for indigent people. Where that woman is, or what happened to her newborn, I do not know. But that episode is etched indelibly in my memory. I remember even today how, for one brief interval of time, I and an illiterate, malnourished young mother-in-the-making stole a private moment to share the thrill of a new heartbeat.

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