

LIGHT REFLECTIONS

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Unicum Magisterium

Years ago, my mother-in-law gave me a copy of Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* for my birthday. Set in Castalia, a future, quasi-monastic intellectual society, the novel follows the fortunes of Joseph Knecht, a gifted young man who rises from humble origins to achieve eminence as *Magister Ludi*, or “master of the game”—i.e. the novel's eponymous Glass Bead Game, a sophisticated intellectual exercise that aims to synthesize all domains of knowledge—music and math, philosophy and science, culture and art—into a unified, symbolic language. The novel spoke powerfully to my yearning for spiritual and intellectual harmony and wholeness. It still does.

A similar yearning informs the very idea of a *university* (Latin *universitas* = the whole, aggregate; and *universus* = whole, entire). Molded by the inexorable march of specialization, however, the modern university is sharply divided by disciplines. Despite occasional paeans to the power of interdisciplinarity, many disciplinary silos stand rigid and firm.

The divide between *modes* of knowledge is, if anything, even sharper. The rationalist, scientist revolution of recent centuries has achieved an almost total triumph, as reflected in the notion, popularized by Stephen Jay Gould, a biologist, of “non-overlapping magisteria.” Gould maintained that that science and faith constitute discrete domains of teaching authority (“magisteria”) that do not overlap. In Gould's account, trouble and conflict arise whenever one domain intrudes upon the other's ground.¹

By contrast, the Restoration's founding prophets asserted unequivocally the basic unity of all truth. The Prophet Joseph Smith declared that

“one of the grand fundamental principles of [the restored gospel] is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may.”² Brigham Young's approach was similarly expansive. “Our religion,” he said, “will not clash with or contradict the facts of science in any particular. The gospel embraces all truth.”³

Recent prophets have affirmed this view. When he dedicated our Life Sciences Building in 2015, President Russell M. Nelson observed: “There is no conflict between science and religion. Conflict only arises from an incomplete knowledge of either science or religion—or both.”⁴ Twenty-one years earlier, President Howard W. Hunter offered this stirring synopsis:

God our Father is the author, custodian, and advocate of all truth—truth that is apprehended through intellectual inquiry, truth that is understood feelingly through religious experience, and truth that is distilled upon the soul as wisdom from all of life's encounters. Each of these encounters has an educational function in the preparation of each soul to understand God's truth. With God our Heavenly Father, all truth, wherever found or however apprehended, is circumscribed into one great whole. Ultimately, there are no contradictions, no quarrels, no inscrutable paradoxes, no mysteries. In the meantime, we are commanded in scriptures (note, commanded) to learn by study and by faith, one not being more important than the other in this context.⁵

In this moving passage, President Hunter invokes two familiar phrases—“one great whole” and “by study and faith”—that lie at the heart of the BYU enterprise. We are engaged in the unified pursuit of truth throughout its comprehensive domain: its *unicum magisterium*, if you will.

Throughout *The Glass Bead Game*, Joseph Knecht wrestles with the tension between the active life and the contemplative life, between practical application and theoretical purity, between political engagement and scholarly seclusion. In debates with Plinio Designori, a brilliant guest student from the outside world, Joseph defends Castalia against charges that it is isolated, indulgent, and impractical.⁶ Long after Plinio leaves Castalia, Joseph continues the debates internally, ultimately resigning his post as *magister ludi* to tutor Plinio's son. Tragically, Joseph's transition toward real-world engagement is cut short when he drowns in a mountain lake.

I resonate both with the ideal of harmonizing all truth and the ideal of applying truth in engagement and service. The same mother-in-law who gave me *The Glass Bead Game* also introduced me to Milton's *Areopagitica*:

*I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race, where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat.*⁷

What if, I have wondered, one could find a place where the ideals of Castalia (harmonizing truth across disciplines) could merge with the ideals of *Areopagitica* (sallying forth in virtue to serve a world in need)? What if both ideals could be amplified and clarified by the coruscating light of the Restoration? What if there were a community committed to that *unicum magisterium* in which spiritual growth and intellectual enlargement merge to nurture disciple-scholars who are “equipped with the capacity and fired with the desire to spend the rest of their lives learning for the Savior’s glory and serving others in His name”⁸?

There is, of course, just such a place, and we all work there. We call it Brigham Young University.

¹ See generally, Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (1999).

² *The Joseph Smith Papers*, Discourse, 9 July 1843. “The first and fundamental principle of our holy religion,” Joseph wrote from Liberty Jail, “is that we believe we have a right to embrace all and every item of truth without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men.” *The Joseph Smith Papers*, Letter to Isaac Galland, 22 March 1839.

³ *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 14, p. 116. And again: “If you can find a truth in heaven, earth or hell, it belongs to our doctrine. We believe it; it is ours; we claim it.” *Journal of Discourses*, vol. 13, p. 335.

⁴ Russell M. Nelson, “The Tie Between Science and Religion,” in John S. Tanner (ed), *Envisioning BYU: Volume 1—Foundations and Dreams* (2022) 291.

⁵ Quoted in “President’s Formal Charge of Responsibility,” *The Church News*, 26 November 1994.

⁶ The term *Glasperlenspiel* has entered colloquial German to refer to an arid, detached, and, in the pejorative sense, purely *academic* exercise.

⁷ John Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644).

⁸ “Becoming BYU – Student Success Vision Statement” (2025).