

The Theoretical Physicist and the Barman

I guess I have been lucky in my occupation as I never suffered from any Monday morning blues. Each day brought its own rewards and accomplishments and I was well contented. When I retired, I never felt that my life, in relation to my work, had been wasted. In my travels, I heard many of my fellows' moan about being trapped in their job, unsatisfied and yet they remained with much discontent. It must be terrible to look back on one's life and consider it a wasted one.

David Klein was in his 60th year and a professor of theoretical physics at the California Institute of Technology (Caltech) which is a private research university in Pasadena, California, in the United States of America. He had never married and had devoted his career in the pursuit of his work in relation to 'string theory' - bringing together quantum mechanics and Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity. One of the many vibrational states of the string corresponds to the graviton, a quantum mechanical particle that carries the gravitational force. Thus, string theory is a theory of quantum gravity. Having spent nearly 35 years of his life on the study, he was reaching an impasse that he was unaware of but one soon to be recognised.

It was late evening and David had left the campus and was walking down Fair Oaks Avenue when he called in at a local bar for a drink. There were few customers and he sat at the bar and after he was served, the barman welcomed his conversation, and stated, *"I am guessing that you have just come from Caltech, I sense you are a teacher; they often come in here."* David replied, *"You are right, I am a professor in theoretical physics."* The barman smiled, and poured him another drink and was offered one himself. The night wore on at the professor's expense because he matched his drinks each time, with one for the barman. Both of them became inebriated and merry. In the relaxed atmosphere of a new friendship, through the consumption of alcohol, the conversation began to open up.

The barman leaned over the counter and spouted some philosophy, *"surely, is it not a waste of one's time, to consider Einstein's theory in relation to quantum mechanics and attempt to unravel the ' Gordian knot' of the universe when it cannot be undone. It is generally accepted; there is no conclusive resolution; it is all theory and conjecture. After all, it is like seeking the answer for possible life after death; remember the line in Horace's book of Odes – do not ask how long you will live for it is forbidden knowledge?"* David sat at the bar with a stunned look on his face and in his own quiet way he marvelled at the barman's statement and then felt slightly depressed. He ordered another drink for both of them and taking a sip of his double 'Jack Daniels' he sat back to ponder.

Eventually, and as if seeking to defend his position, he questioned the barman, *"have you always been a barman?"* The reply was a swift one and to the point, *"ah, you think because I am a barman that you might think you could belittle me. Perhaps, my remarks have stung your ego or on the other hand, you are genuinely intrigued and wish to understand my background?"* The professor replied, *"the latter."*

The barman finished cleaning his glasses with his cloth and placing them behind the bar, he responded, *"I am 51 years of age and up until a few months ago, I was a professor of philosophy at the Pasadena City College in Colorado Boulevard. I thought of myself as a modern-day Socrates but all I achieved in my 25 years at the college was to mimic and adapt the great works of the 'historical philosophers' like Aristotle and Marcus Aurelius. It is all very well living a moral lifestyle but when you realise you have nothing to add, and everything you teach has been written over and over again in books that anyone can pick up and read; I felt I had wasted my life and I became unhappy. One day, I simply picked up my stuff, retired early and came here to work in this bar. I am now very content."*

Professor David Klein, did not reply at first, he just sat there pondering the drink in his glass. Eventually, he answered, *"I have not been unhappy in my work and I admit I have added nothing to Einstein's work and many other theoretical physicists before me. However, each day is the same as the last and like many other people, I just muddle on in life without much thought to it all. I go home at night to my flat, read a book, enjoy my music and a drink before retiring to bed. I repeat the entire sequence all over again the next day. I guess it is like a bird being born in a cage, I know no better; the cage is my sanctuary with no thought of escape. Meeting you has made me pause to think and perhaps really think on other matters outside theoretical physics for the first time."*

David Klein sat back in his chair and stared at his now empty glass. The barman poured him another drink and said, *"this one is on me professor."* David picked up the glass and drank it down; he smiled at the barman and standing up he thanked him for his kindness and his backstory. He added, *"it has been a revelation meeting you"* and turning, he walked out of the bar, waving his right hand in the air as he left. He went home to his flat, enjoyed his music and read a book before retiring to bed. The next morning, a sober David, repeated the entire sequence again as he had done all his working life and never did leave his sanctuary.

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