

The Grandmaster House

Friday, December 18, 2009



GM Jesse Kraai gives us a glimpse into life at the Grandmaster house in the Bay Area, where Kraai, GM Vinay Bhat, GM Josh Friedel and IM David Pruess studied together.

I've played some bourgeois moves. In chess, I've been spiritually consoled by the prudent building move and its complacent satisfaction. It doesn't know what your next move is. It doesn't care. It sees patterns it has already seen and finds warmth and comfort in that familiarity. And in life I have often greedily fought for what others considered entitlements and allowed the inertia of those entitlements to move me.

But I did move to the GM house, a couple of Jews and a Brahman, all enjoying some stage of autism, assembled together in what used to be a crack home. My sister said the position looked bad, and that we would need weekly house meetings, dramatic sit-downs in which we explored the tense psychological space surrounding who did the dishes last.

But my tribe doesn't really care about the dishes. And that's why some people think that we are not bourgeois, that we are intellectuals. We sometimes like to think of ourselves that way too. But, generally, meditations upon self-identity are viewed with the same indifference as the dishes.

The real danger of the GM house wasn't foreseeable. It wasn't a trap or a trick you miss a few moves out. The danger was far more structural. It was the opportunity to see more clearly what we wished to achieve and then the demonstration of our own personal inabilities to attain what was directly in front of us.

Consider the post-game babble you've heard outside the tournament hall. The losers seem to suggest that chess is a flat, rather dull game, perhaps even ruled by chance: 'I blundered', 'got in time trouble', 'wasn't feeling too great'. Whereas a



winner's rich smile can raise cliché to something that feels like poetry: 'Dude!, I went off the top rope', 'Elbow from the sky!'. And you can spend your whole life bouncing between these two poles of self-delusion without coming to much of an understanding of what constitutes the art of the game. And whilst that sounds depressing, it's actually quite comforting - because you can allow yourself to believe that you know what is going on when chess is played.

But try looking at the rook and bishop vs. rook endgame with the Panda (aka. GM Josh Friedel). I will see the position and have to think: calculate some variations, and try to remember a few positions where the weaker side can hold. But the Panda doesn't look at the position like that. He knows, simply by glancing at the position, which moves lose and which moves draw, as if he had access to a color-coded scroll which rolls out with each move. It is a kind of unambiguous clarity that I cannot comprehend. I don't know where it comes from. And I have been forced to understand that I will never be able to see the pieces that way.

Then try to hear the Panda's sigh. I began to notice it only after months of study. It's apparently an unconscious exhalation, somehow grafted onto his system, which escapes from a very deep place somewhere around the perineum, when a fatal attack is allowed in an analysis session. At first you don't hear the sigh. You and the other people about the table, who have also not realized that someone is getting mated, have their minds too close to the variations - like eight year olds massed around a soccer ball, drifting about the field as if it were a ouija board. It's as if the Panda sees a bigger view of the situation, and just needs some time to demonstrate the attack - as if he were translating his game to ours.

The interesting structural danger in coming to the GM house was revealed in this communal study. If I were just to play the Panda I have a good chance to hold, sometimes I might even win. But then I would only be seeing the moves, and not what lies behind them. By simply playing in tournaments I would have never had an insight into the many hidden talents that make up playing chess well. And I would have never had a taste of abilities which feel out of reach. For even though I have begun to hear a faint sigh within myself, it is an ability which continues to feel otherworldly.

This direct perception of limitation is magnified by an intuition of still greater ability when my friend, the Panda, apparently faced something else [in his 2-0 loss to Wang Hao in the World Cup](#). I don't know what the something is. But I now suspect, based on my study at the GM house, that it is a whole range of abilities which are as rare and unattainable as superpowers. And Wang Hao doesn't even seem to be World Champion material. He is just another 2700.

An awareness of skills which feel like they are spoken in another language may lead to self-doubt. And doubt is not always a practical asset in chess. The assimilation of new skills will also be painful. You will not master the art of the sigh simply by recognizing its physiological provenience. Your time at the GM house is not like a horde of pennies on which you are waiting to accrue interest. It is not a bourgeois move. Because your rating might never go up.

Two guys riding in my peloton, GM Vinay Bhat and IM David Pruess, struggled with the rating chart on the refrigerator. When Vinay came to the house he talked of going from 2500 Fide to 2600 in a year. And David thought he would be a GM in a matter of months. But months will turn into years and our rating graph will often look like a flat line bobbing to a standard deviation.

David and Vinay don't study with us anymore, and they are both in the process of leaving the competitive chess world. To me they seem traumatized. And I believe I have some insight into the pain they have suffered. But I - and my expectations - are more grey: and at this stage of my life, a good flagellation is less likely to open a fresh wound than it is to revisit an old scar.

Most American chess players develop their skills in a lonesome closet-like space. Without mentors, their thinking becomes very independent, as well as uncultured. And the lack of a taught chess language inhibits the growth of chess wisdom. This lack leads to a flat and colorblind view of the game which thinks of chess ability as 'raw talent'. But this one-dimensional characterization paves over the many pockets of artistry whose brilliance will only be revealed when you look under the surface of the played move. This was a central lesson I learned at the GM house.

But more important was that to acknowledge what you don't know and may never possess is a dangerous move. Because you are not entitled. And the patterns which guide you are not in fact leading you anywhere. They are helping you play the same game again and again - in chess and in life.

The GM house has until May 15, 2010. If it does not find new recruits it will perish. And although this was perhaps not the most appealing of advertisements, it nevertheless is one.

