

# American Zen\*

*“Though what I was writing about was camouflaged as the biography of a madman, underneath that camouflage was a serious attempt to describe a newer and better way of looking philosophically at the world”*

– Robert Pirsig

It can hardly be doubted that what began as a vision of a better world beyond the narrow scope of our individual lives has somehow become tainted by ambition and greed. The resolution of the thinking/doing paradox to effect ‘Quality’ that was addressed along with several other intellectual jawbreakers in *Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig twenty-five years ago (it’s been fifty years now) has been fully integrated into our culture for corporate purposes. That resolution now contributes to the increased intellectual depravity of the individual at the hands of corporate interests. Even our university level education has scooted over to accommodate this sociological paradigm shift and in its unholy marriage to industry has taken on a do-it-yourself-stupid workshop appearance. The more contemplative aspects of learning have necessarily also been displaced by kindergarten exercises. We now learn languages (and every other topic) by show-and-tell interaction and conversation – how totally obvious and wonderful – and yet, how absolutely absurd and grotesque. Even learned papers by otherwise respected professors at time-honored institutions on obscure topics are subsumed by a here's-how-you-do-that sing-song rhetoric. Yes, mere rhetoric – the wolfman's chosen creed for martyrdom but with negative connotations accreted unto itself for millennia. Learning by doing indeed.

Is this what Pirsig intended? Even if it had been, which of the various Pirsigs intended it? Certainly not the wolfman incarnate whose ultimate resurrection we witnessed on the shore of the Pacific. No. Only the spec-writing, basket-weaving zombie who began the epic journey believed in doing above all else – not the resurrected Phaedrus, not the author who wrote the epic – only the interloping, child-hating, body snatching instinctive reactions left quivering after electroshock treatment who maintained the machine until its owner's ultimate return.

Preachers are wont to ply their rhetoric with a question, "Did Jesus live and die in vain?" Being of the opinion that no question should have but one answer, I have no problem with saying, "Yes!" But Pirsig and his son Chris, who was murdered senselessly as are so many other Americans, are much more relevant to our lives today and I would be loath to answer, "Yes" to a similar question in their regard. But my faith is faltering I must admit. For even though our culture gobbled a million copies of Pirsig's prophetic Bantam Classic wafer in libation to our possible redemption, we have gotten it all wrong. We always do. What must Chris – the symbolic Christ whose death was real – have felt that night he was slain in the streets of San Francisco? If Jesus felt bad on that night in Gethsemeny when he cried aloud, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" how much worse must he feel now, having been slain, not symbolically for an idea or the vaguest of purposes, but at random as death works in reality in the cities of America. What must martyrdom at the hands of random chance do for an ideology? Now there is a conundrum for American Zen.

A lot has happened since Robert Pirsig first dissected his own person and that of American culture. He is different now. His son Chris is dead – murdered senselessly as are too many in the streets of our major cities. We are different. We are dying more slowly but as certain intellectual

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\* The article was published in *Gift of Fire*, issue 101, 26-27 (November/December 1998).

deaths just as we were when he gave us such rude resuscitation – when he jerked away the light at the end of the tunnel. Robert Redford is an old man now.

*Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance* provided many things for us in addition to explaining values (which I don't think many of us understood). Among them was resolution of those major dualities in our lives: besides *thinking/doing* there were the nature/technology and classic/romantic dualities that confound us. But the 'Quality' theme was too obvious for the young intelligentsia to miss – those who have since become the CEO's of our major corporations – nor did they fail to exploit it. "Quality is job one!" became the theme song of proficiency experts – the battle cry of profiteers. The obvious goal had been betterment of the individual by assimilation into the quality of the work that one performed. But it was transmogrified by sardonic humor into betterment of the product by assimilation of the individual. It's in the small print you didn't read before signing.

Quality of the product is not even (or at least no longer) what the CEO's are after. They are obviously pursuing the bottom line – profits. So the *becoming one with one's work* is just the ultimate shackle of slavery, not an elevation of purpose and meaning. This is just a slick scheme of exploitation.

Of course the resolution of the nature/technology paradox had been resolved by nylon rope, jet skis, and snowmobiles – motorcycles are retro, really a thing of the past.

Who cares about the resolution to the classic/romantic aspect of our lives now that we have 'corporate poets'. No shit, *corporate poets!* Don't laugh, V.P.'s are being fired for laughing. Boeing subsidizes one (and fired a V.P. for laughing) – and Madison Avenue does Shelly to nauseating perfection in the pretense that Gallo wine has *Quality*. In divorce courts *fidelity* and other remnants of romantic love are of no standing but we can still express our vicarious indignation by impeaching a president on that account. We have it all.

Everyone does Chautauquas now.

Walk down an aisle between cubicles in any of our major corporate headquarters and you will see some upstart giving a class in the Zen of Xerox to fellow employees who tolerate this tedium heroically as their penance to reciprocity. For one half hour of training credit you will learn how to manipulate the four handles on your *ergonomic* chair. Someone in your department gives an off-hour class in Windows 9X, NT, or Excel. Self-respecting parents share teaching responsibilities of their children at the local blue-ribbon whoopee-do Montessori school of the predestined *avante guard*.

But we don't teach or learn anything of *value!* The substance of all these sessions are what the *spec writer* wrote in the maintenance manual that no one would read – that no one *needs* to read. It's just the sound of our own voices saying, "I'm OK, You're OK" – the touchy-feely, cuddly notions of universalized tender loving care – yeah, I know, it is so familiar to us we just call it 'TLC' as though it were Kentucky Fried Chicken. There is no content to any of this talking – it's what we've come to accept as all that can be expected of *rhetoric*; it's just the stuff that keeps your macaroni from collapsing and where would we be without that. This is not the same as being one with your work, it's the same as being one and the same as icky gooey crap.

So why would we have accepted that the answer was not in knowing, but in doing – ultimately doing the teaching of ourselves? How on earth could thousands of years of accumulated cultural knowledge be learned by sweeping the oldsters out of the way – without a teacher? As the Bible should have taught us long ago, "And how will they hear without a preacher?" that is, without someone ordained.

Yeah, maybe Christ died in vain – don't forget that! But forget history; we are teaching and learning only relevance now. In America, the evangelical heresy of lay preaching has even taken over the Church of Reason. We are preoccupied with pumping our vast store of knowledge back though this umbilical to the past in a perversion of omphaloskepsis as though we would educate our very forebears with our vast knowledge. Incest has always been the primary danger of any intellectual endeavor and we have now achieved that ultimate in incestuous intellectual behavior. We teach ourselves by doing it!

