

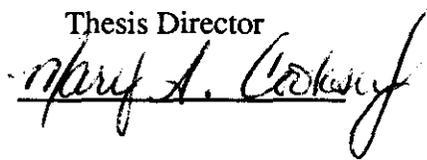
The Mysticism of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

An Honors Creative Project (ID 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary A. Cook", written over a horizontal line.

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The Mysticism of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Penni Sims

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Sixteen years ago a novel by Robert M. Pirsig entitled *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* hit the bookstores. Much to Pirsig's, and his publisher's, surprise the novel became a bestseller. Ironically, this sixteen year-old novel is even more timely today than when it was first published.

Pirsig uses the motorcycle as a metaphor so that his readers will start looking at technology, not as something that is intimidating, but rather as something with redeeming social values.

It is easy to blame technology for all the evils in the world, especially, from an ecological point of view. Technology has become a scapegoat; however, technology is an essential part of life as we know it. The novel addresses this double standard, dehumanizing technology while counting on its existence to heat water, warm/cool homes, provide food, etc. John and Sylvia, two characters in Pirsig's novel, are antitechnologists that refuse to maintain their motorcycle, fix a leaking faucet, or

deal with tools because these things represent technology.

John and Sylvia's attitude towards technology puzzled Pirsig because they are intelligent, logical individuals who should realize that everyday existence is linked to technology.

Pirsig states in his novel, "I disagree with them about cycle maintenance, but not because I am out of sympathy with their feelings about technology. I just think that their flight from and hatred of technology is self-defeating. The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower. To think otherwise is to demean the Buddha - which is to demean oneself."

Ange Cooksey, philosophy instructor and Academic Advisor at Ball State University said that Pirsig's novel offers "truly universal messages." "I can always work with *Zen*. *Zen* gives us an awful lot of good advice,"

she said.

It is easy to see that Pirsig's novel has dramatically affected Cooksey. Hanging on a wall in her office is a student's rendering of Phaedrus (Pirsig's ghost). There is a poster-board with photos from Bozeman, a place Pirsig used to teach, leaning against a shelf. The final clue is a paperback book that is so worn from use it is falling apart at the binding.

"The book forced me to take a look at my personal concept of the world. It fine-tuned it. It gave me a vocabulary and a place to plug it into. There's a little of Phaedrus in me. It helped me stay grounded out in reality. *Zen* forced me to get honest with myself about how I felt about technology. It has enabled an antitechnological person like me to appreciate computers, appliances and cars," she said.

William Nothstine, speech professor, was so

"Zen gives us an awful lot of good advice."

enthralled with *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* that he began studying Eastern religions, particularly Zen. Nothstine also credits the novel with the work he did in Japan helping individuals with communication skills. Nothstine said many of these individuals possessed excellent writing skills; however, they could not grasp oral communication skills. Nothstine relates this discrepancy to conflicts of ideologies.

"The novel launched me on an educational path that I've spent the last ten years on, discovering ways of dealing with discourse and knowledge," he said. "When you have a value system that begins with devaluing the other system how can you create discourse that has any chance of being effective, especially, if those ideologies are incompatible?"

Cooksey and Nothstine first read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* in the seventies and they still look to this novel for answers. Nothstine, like Cooksey, was affected on a personal level by the novel. This

novel triggered a desire to look at science and technology as important social values. Nothstine said this desire is the main reason he has become involved with Ball State University's Center for Information and Communication Sciences, a state-of-the-art graduate school that offers courses on technology in its curriculum.

Cooksey did not read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* until the late seventies when it was assigned in one of her undergraduate courses.

"There is an assumption that if you are constantly tinkering you won't break down. But Pirsig did. It's a powerful metaphor, the concept of maintenance."

In retrospect Cooksey said it was ironic that she did not read the novel earlier because the novel was full of the same insights and observations that she was dealing with during her undergraduate career. Cooksey attributes the re-

luctance to tackle this novel to an intrinsic fear of learning the truth about ourselves, our values and our attitudes.

"I had been told to read it as early as 1975. A lot of people were suggesting I read it and I kept saying go away. The novel was packed full of insights and observations that I had been brought to before. I could identify with the mystical idea of quality he was talking about," Cooksey said.

Unlike Cooksey, Joseph Trimmer, professor of English, read the novel the first year it was published because of a good review in *The New York Times*. Trimmer said he liked the metaphor of the motorcycle.

"I like the metaphor that the inner and outer realities have to be tinkered with to keep them running," Trimmer said. "Knowing that patiently and in a meditative state you are constantly trying to tinker with the world and yourself. There is an assumption that if you are constantly tinkering, you won't break down. But Pirsig did. It's a

powerful metaphor, the concept of maintenance."

On the other hand, Anthony Edmonds, chair and professor of history, said the motorcycle was the one part of the novel that did not appeal to him.

"I have always despised motorcycles. They are ridiculous machines," Edmonds said. "Pirsig said, 'And the Buddha is in the motorcycle too.' I don't fully agree with that but I am now tolerant of people that like motorcycles."

Not only has Pirsig's novel affected Cooksey, Nothstine, Trimmer and Edmonds on a personal level, but it has also affected them pedagogically. Cooksey, Nothstine, and Trimmer have assigned the book as a course requirement while Edmond's teaching methods were directly affected by *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.

"The real university is nothing less than the continuing body of reason itself."

"This novel made me a

little more aware of 'the other side' and giving the students the chance to express themselves," Edmonds said. "It made me a little more tolerable of right-brain intuitive."

Throughout Pirsig's Chautaugua he struggles to find an equilibrium between classic and romantic understanding, and between what he terms the real University and the Church of Reason.

"The real University... has no specific location. It owns no property, pays no salaries and receives no material dues. The real University is a state of mind. It is that great heritage of rational thought that has been brought down to us through the centuries and which does not exist at any specific location. It's a state of mind which is regenerated throughout the centuries by a body of people who traditionally carry the title of professor...The real University is nothing less than the continuing body of reason itself," Pirsig states in his novel.

The real University is an idealistic university while

the Church of Reason paints a more realistic portrait of what takes place at an institution of higher-education.

"There's a legal entity which is unfortunately called by the same name but which is quite another thing...It owns property, is capable of paying salaries, or receiving money and of responding to legislative pressures in the process. But this second university, the legal corporation, cannot teach, does not generate new knowledge or evaluate ideas," Pirsig said.

"It is damn hard to be creative and teach creative thinking in a university setting."

The conflict between the real University and the Church of Reason is still in effect in today's institutions of higher-education.

"I've tried to counter-balance Church of Reason requisitions by putting in some true University criteria," Cooksey said. "I work hard to inject caring and knowledge into the classroom, sometimes they (students) would prefer ano-

nymity but they won't find that in my classroom."

Nothstine agreed that it is hard to get away from the Church of Reason while teaching at a university setting.

"It is damn hard to be creative and teach creative thinking in a university setting," he said. "The university is ultimately founded on the model of classical understanding. The Church of Reason states things that are not dealt with in that (classical) way are things that the university should not be concerned with first and foremost. Anytime you teach first principles that you cannot question - this does not belong in the university."

The conflict between the Church of Reason and the real University is what still excites Trimmer about teaching. Trimmer said he is still fascinated by the authority role the teacher automatically assumes and the passive role the student is expected to assume.

"It is a constant interrogation of student and

teacher/teacher and student," he said. "It's what makes education interesting. The minute you empower those on the other side it puts your authority at stake."

Edmonds is not as skeptical about the role the Church of Reason plays at a university; however, after reading Pirsig's novel he began allowing students more freedom to speak out in his classroom.

"The real cycle you're working on is a cycle called yourself... Working on a motorcycle, working well, caring, is to become a part of the process, to achieve an inner peace of mind."

"Before you can make holistic judgments you have to know something...Hear a sermon at the 'Church of Reason' and then come to the conclusion," Edmonds said.

Pirsig went beyond the limits in his quest to define and understand quality. In

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance Pirsig seems to be preaching of the evil of hubris and the goodness of humility. Pirsig uses dualisms throughout the novel. One of his messages is that it is important to find some type of middle-ground or peace-of-mind.

"You've got to have peace of mind, to value the small activities as well as the big. Every small action is an expression of your soul," Cooksey said.

At the beginning of the novel Pirsig is on a motorcycle trip with his son Chris and their friends John and Sylvia. They are travelling along a backroad when Pirsig spots a red-winged blackbird. He points it out to an unimpressed Chris. Pirsig's message about taking time out to notice the red-winged blackbird and the need to find a middle-ground is as important today as the first day the novel hit the bookstores. Pirsig offers the best response to the importance of this novel in his afterword. Pirsig defines *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* as a culture-bearing

book. A culture-bearing book challenges cultural value assumptions at a time when the culture is in favor of the challenge.

Pirsig states, "This book offers another, more serious alternative to material success. It's not so much an alternative as an expansion of the meaning of "success" to something larger than just getting a good job and staying out of trouble... It gives a positive goal to work toward that does not confine. That is the main reason for the book's success, I think. The whole culture happened to be looking for exactly what this book has to offer."

If we are going to rise up to the responsibilities that lurk ahead we are going to have to take a long, hard look at ourselves as individuals, as a society, and as a culture. We need to ask ourselves what type of values our culture deems acceptable.

Are conveniences such as styrofoam plates, plastic containers, and diapers worth the risk of substantial damage to the environ-

ment? Should factories that produce cars, household appliances, and clothing be shut down until we learn how to eliminate toxic waste? In the last year values that prevailed in the eighties have been attacked and replaced with different types of values. Whether these values are better remains to be seen.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is a tremendous tool to use as a guide when taking a closer look at these values. Just ask Ange Cooksey, William Nothstine, Anthony Edmonds, or Joseph Trimmer.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Edwards, Betty. Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain.
Los Angeles: J. P. Tarcher, Inc., 1979.

Herrigel, Eugen. Zen in the Art of Archery. New York:
Random House, Inc., 1981.

Pirsig, Robert M. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.
New York: Bantam Books, 1981.

Analysis of Creative Project

I. Statement of the Creative Project

I studied Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance in an independent study course with the speech department and discussed the novel with Ange Cooksey, my honor's thesis advisor, throughout January, February, and March. I decided to interview other individuals who were familiar with the novel. I was interested in what messages they got out of the novel and the way these messages affected them. My creative project is a summation of these interviews.

II. Background Information

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is full of powerful messages, warnings, and insights. Each time I have read it I have found something that I had missed before. This novel is like a terrific movie that can be watched over and over again without getting boring because something different is gained each time.

I knew that this novel had changed some of my perceptions about technology along with some of my personal views on life. I began noticing that Dr. William Nothstine, my independent study professor, also seemed affected by the messages. And to say that Ange Cooksey, my honor's advisor, was affected by

Pirsig's novel would be quite an understatement. I wanted to know if others had also been moved by this novel.

Ange Cooksey put me in touch with various individuals whom she knew had read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. After setting up interviews with these individuals I wrote an article, "The Mysticism of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance," that explains how this novel has affected these individuals on a personal and intellectual level.

I interviewed Nothstine and Cooksey along with Dr. Anthony Edmonds, chair and professor of history and Dr. Joseph Trimmer, Assistant professor of English. I have never been extremely good at interviewing; therefore, I had to struggle throughout the interviewing process. Each night before an interview I would write down those questions I wanted to ask the interviewee. Then I would worry that these questions were too broad, too specific, or just not appropriate. The ten minutes before an interview were awful. My hands would get clammy but before I realized it the interview would be over.

The interviews were insightful, sometimes revealing, and overall extremely interesting. Edmonds admitted he hated motorcycles, Nothstine admitted worshipping Spider-man as a child, Trimmer told of a professor who had an experiment dealing with the gradeless university here at Ball State, and Cooksey told of the time she fixed her car's muffler with a coat hanger.

The interviewing process was easy when compared to writing the actual article. I had terrific quotes but it was now up to me to explain the quotes in a way that people who had never heard of this novel could understand. This process confirmed that I am a true "romantic." It took me forever to organize my thoughts. It took me even longer to compile the quotes in a way that I, let alone anyone else, could understand.

This project has been extremely beneficial to me. I had to call and set up sessions with the individuals I wanted to interview. I am not very comfortable talking to people on a one-to-one basis; therefore, this was a tremendous exercise for me. This project also forced me to think about the type of questions I needed to ask the interviewee. This was practical experience that will come in handy if I go into a career in newswriting for radio or television, an option that exists at this time. The interviews were nerve-racking but again they were practical experience for a career in news. Writing the actual article was the hardest part of this project. I was forced to analyze my notes, organize my notes, and then try to compile the quotes in a way that would make sense to someone reading the article without the knowledge I had about the subject.

This creative project was a positive experience because it required my becoming more professional when conducting the interviews. I had to interview the individuals when it was convenient for them, not when it was convenient for me. I had to look and act as professional as the circumstances surrounding the interview

would allow.

The practical experience I gained from this project is important, but it was the ability to further probe an inspiring novel that made it all worthwhile. I got to debate "the real University" versus "the Church of Reason" with people who search for an equilibrium everyday. I was able to explore the evils of technology with individuals who protested the Vietnam War. Lastly, I was treated as an intelligent, responsible adult, rather than a stumbling undergraduate.

"The Mysticism of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" will not win a pulitzer-prize, nor will it move anyone like Pirsig's novel. This project is valuable because it tells of the power of communication. Pirsig had a powerful story to tell. The impact it had on the interviewee's lives implies that he told it quite well.

The messages throughout this novel are as timely today as they were when the novel was first published in 1974. Pirsig warns of the decline of educational systems, of a society spoiled by conveniences and set apart from what is going on in the world, and of a need to understand and utilize technology. These messages are extremely important today. The environment is being destroyed because our ancestors did not fully understand the consequences of industrialization. Eastern Europe, forgotten for so long, is now alive and of immense importance to our economy. Everyone agrees something is amiss with our educational system but no one cares enough to do anything about it. Meanwhile foreign students are

becoming more educated and putting a squeeze on the job market. If just one person takes a deeper look into these problems and follows the solutions Pirsig offers in his novel, this project has performed a valuable service.

III. Evidence of Research

(see Interview notes)

Dr. Anthony Edmonds

Zen Interview Notes

April 12, 1990 at 3:15 p.m.

Question: When did you first read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance?

Answer: I read a book when it was first published.

Question: What was your initial impression of the book?

Answer: I thought it was wonderful reading, thoroughly enjoyable. It worked on all sorts of levels. For a novel that works on a narrative level it works on a literary level well written, wonderful characterizations, a combination of fiction and autobiography. Elements of fiction and non-fiction are interwoven. I learned a hell-of-a-lot about teaching from this book. A brief course in the history of western philosophy. It works on a psychological level.

Question: What did you think of Pirsig's evaluation of higher education?

Answer: I did not fully agree with it. In a way it depends upon the independent teacher and the independent course. It is a synthesis of the two. Before you can make holistic judgements you have to know something before you debate it. Hear a

Superficially it's not that hard of work. If you cast the Church of Reason out you are going to be in trouble. (Pirsig's novel) did make me a little more aware of the other side, giving students the chance to express themselves. You still have to have an understanding. Made me a little less intolerable of right-brain intuitive.

Question: What was the message you got out of this novel?

Answer: I have always despised motorcycles. They are ridiculous machines. I learned to understand how people can appreciate technology. 'And the Buddha is in the motorcycle too.' I don't fully agree with that. I am tolerant of people that like motorcycles.

Dr. William Nothstine

Zen Interview Notes

April 13, 1990 at 2:30 p.m.

Question: What intrigued you about Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance?

Answer: How you can create discourse that has any chance of being effective when dealing with ideologies that are incompatible. When you have a value system that begins with devaluing the other system.

Question: Do you agree or disagree with Pirsig's perception of higher education?

Answer: I agree that the university is ultimately founded on the model of classical understanding. That things that are not dealt with in that way are things that the university should not be concerned with first and foremost. Anytime you have first principles that you cannot question that doesn't belong in the university. It is damn hard to be creative and teach creative thinking in an university setting. What are we actually doing here? Are we here to advance learning? Are we here to create good people and world citizens? Are we here to prepare for material success?

Question: What was the most important message that you got out of this novel?

Answer: It is the book that got me started studying Zen thinking. It is also the book that got me involved with English teachers in Japan that possess excellent writing skills, however, the oral communication skills were lacking. I started dealing with questions of science and technology as problems of social values. This novel launched me on an educational path that I have spent the last ten years on, searching for ways of dealing with discourse and knowledge without the classical implications.

Ange Cooksey

Zen Interview Notes

April 13, 1990 at 3:00 p.m.

Question: Why did you read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance?

Answer: It was part of Dr. Trimmer's syllabus. I had been told to read it as early as 1975. A lot of people were suggesting I read it and I kept saying go away. It is packed full of insights and observations that I had been brought to before. I saw a lot of familiarities. How I could identify with what he was talking about - the mystical idea of quality.

Question: Do you agree with Prisig's perception of higher education?

Answer: I agree. The agreement is born of ten years of teaching at an university setting. I've dealt with that trying to get a field-trip for my dream class funded. The Church of Reason has come to sit in my office the past few days.

Question: How has Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance affected you on a personal level?

Answer: The book forced me to take a look at my personal concept of the world. It fine-tuned it. It gave me a vocabulary and a place to plug it into. There is a little of Phaedrus in me. It helped me

stay grounded out in reality. It forced me to get honest with myself about how I felt about technology. It has enabled an anti-technologist, like me, to appreciate computers, household goods, cars, etc.

Question: How has this novel affected your teaching?

Answer: I never was a grade-lover. When I met up with the section about grades in Zen it fueled a fire in me. I cannot eliminate grades, but it has enabled me to downplay grades, to place less evaluation of objectivity and evaluate more on subjectivity. It takes an awful lot of time and an awful lot of energy. I've tried to counter-balance Church of Reason requisites and putting in some true university criteria. I expect more from students who are gifted and talented and I expect less from those who have trouble attaining knowledge. I work hard to inject caring and knowledge into the classroom, sometimes to the student's dismay, because sometimes they would prefer anonymity, but they won't find that in my classroom.

Question: Why continue using this novel?

Answer: I can continue to work with Zen. Zen gives us an awful lot of good advice. You've got to approach a subject from many different viewpoints. You need to work conceptually at a level where Zen is.

The way I've rationalized it to myself is because I'm introducing this book to student four or five years before I saw it. Hopefully they will pick it up again.

Question: What was the most important message you got out of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance?

Answer: To strive for peace-of-mind. You've got to have peace-of-mind. You've got to value small activities as well as big. Every small action is an expression of your soul.

Dr. Joseph Trimmer

Zen Interview

April 19, 1990 at 5:00 p.m.

Question: Why did you read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance?

Answer: I read a review in The New York Times it sounded like an interesting book.

Question: What was your initial impression of this novel?

Answer: I liked the metaphor of the motorcycle that both the inner and outer reality have to be tinkered with to keep them running.

Question: Is the grade-less university a feasible idea?

Answer: Students who are given a pass grade want to know how good their papers were. There is a need for proof. That is what education seems to reward. In some cases grades motivate and can take away anxiety.

Question: What did you think of Prisig's perception of higher education?

Answer: A relationship with a student and teacher is extremely complicated. The book itself revises the question of the role of the learner and the role of the authority. The constant interrogation of

student/teacher and teacher/student is what makes education interesting. The minute you empower those on the other side it makes your authority at stake. These tensions are fascinating.

Question: What important message did you get out of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance?

Answer: The idea of maintenance. The idea that nothing is ever fixed. Knowing that patiently and in a meditative state you are constantly trying to tinker with the world, yourself. There is an assumption that if you are constantly tinkering you won't break down, but he did. It's a powerful metaphor the concept of maintenance.

IV. Evaluation of Project

An article dealing with perceptions of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance is definitely a creative project. The novel does not mention a lot about the Zen religion; however, the messages Pirsig is trying to get across do deal with the Zen religion. Zen, simply defined, is a type of self-actualization or inner-peace. Whether people like or dislike this novel seems rather mute when looking at it from a Zen point-of-view.

Trimmer mentioned this while I was interviewing him. He no longer uses Pirsig's novel in his literature classes because he feels that other authors have gotten the same messages across in fewer number of pages; therefore, those books are easier for students to read. He also stated that Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance has become rather faddish. He stated that my project was further proof that Pirsig's novel was being used as a faddish statement.

Taking on Pirsig's novel as a project was a ridiculous task. There is no way that I can come close to explaining his messages because I have only just begun to scratch the surface of intellectual reason; whereas, Pirsig is already way beyond this level. I do not possess the communication tools, understanding, or language to write about his messages, thoughts, and values. I realize this now. I am grateful that I choose to do this project because it made me realize that I must continue to study so that someday I may understand the intellectual reasoning

Pirsig uses in his novel.

V. Summary and Conclusions

I can honestly say, in conclusion, that working on this project opened doors I never expected to have opened. I got to meet some fantastic individuals while researching this project. The members of my independent study group, the Dead Rhetorician's Society, Ange Cooksey, Joseph Trimmer, Anthony Edmonds and William Nothstine all helped me with this project. If it were not for them this project would never gotten off of the ground.

As difficult as it was I'm glad I embarked on this short chautaugua. I truly feel it is important to have a vast background about something before passing a judgement. I can safely say that this research suggests we look into the good and evil of technology, that educational systems need to be revamped and that we should strive to achieve peace-of-mind.

One of my top priorities this summer is to read Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance again. I'm curious to see what I will discover this time.