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Pirsig's Pilgrims

By Michael Becker
OCTOBER 12, 2011

Wonder flooded Roger Drissel's face as he laid his hand on the worn window sill in a cluttered storeroom in Montana State University's Montana Hall.

Fifty years ago, that storeroom was an office. The professor who occupied it, Drissel's idol, looked on the very same view of the Bridgers as he sat with his feet propped on that same window sill, conceiving the thoughts that would both start a philosophical phenomenon and drive him mad.

"He changed the way millions of people think, and he started it all here," Drissel said.

That man, whose story has inspired thousands to follow his footsteps to MSU, is Robert M. Pirsig, and the bible his devotees carry on their journeys is his book, Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.

Published in 1974 to wide acclaim, Zen was inspired in part by events that started between 1959 and 1961, when Pirsig was an English professor at MSU.

Set just a few years after Pirsig recovered from a mental breakdown, Zen recounts a motorcycle trip Pirsig and his son took from Minnesota to California in 1968. The author uses the road trip as a way to explain his ideas about "quality," a concept much on the minds of people at the time but that defies easy definition.

Zen was also a way for Pirsig to come to terms with his pre-insanity self, whom he refers to as Phaedrus, after the character in Plato's dialogues. Phaedrus haunts the book, teasing Pirsig with glimpses into the mind and life he had before his breakdown.

Something about the philosophy--an attempt to blend spirituality and emotion with technology and cold logic--appealed to readers. Zen became an immediate hit. Fifty thousand copies sold in its first two months, and everyone from rock stars to street vendors were talking about the metaphysics of quality. Within a few years, some devoted readers, like Drissel, got on their motorcycles and began to trace Pirsig's route as a way to gain a deeper understanding of the book.

Drissel, a "disemployed" native of Washington, D.C., said he grew dissatisfied with the versions of reality offered by his Catholic school youth on one hand and his family's engineering background on the other.

"I've probably read it 20 times," Drissel said, showing off his broken-spined, dog-eared paperback copy. "My first copy fell apart."

For him, Zen bridged the gaps between science, religion and art that his upbringing could not explain. The book opened him up to new ideas borrowed from Eastern religions and cultures, ideas that appealed to him at his core, ones he never would have considered without Pirsig's book.

So, 25 years after first reading Zen, with his children grown up and without a job to hold him back, Drissel decided the time was finally right to take his '62 BMW motorcycle on a Pirsig-inspired journey.

He had no distinct plans and no concrete schedule. Instead, he had a GPS unit that helped him avoid major highways and pursue back-road adventure. And while he didn't follow Pirsig's route exactly, he made sure to visit the landmarks from the '68 trip, like MSU.

"That guy opened a whole world of thought to us, and the place where that happened is important," he said.

Sacred ground

A steady trickle of pilgrims passes through Bozeman every year, and artist Tina DeWeese has met most of them. Her late parents, Bob and Gennie, were close friends of Pirsig the professor, and the author mentions them often in Zen.

That makes the DeWeese home in Cottonwood Canyon holy ground.

"The people who do this trip are all really, really interesting," DeWeese said. "They're all caught up in the thought and the mythology."

Pirsig and Bob DeWeese were contemporaries at Montana State College, as it was then called. Pirsig taught English and DeWeese art. Gennie was a recognized artist.

As characters in Zen, the DeWeeses played the foil to Pirsig's analytic and scientific mind. Their worldviews' incompatibility with his pushed Pirsig deeper into his questioning of quality.

But Pirsig wasn't the only one thinking deep thoughts at MSC during that time, Tina DeWeese said. The university had a strong community of artists, friends and professors, people excited about the ideas on the bleeding edges of their fields and who were eager to share ideas with each other, she said.

Her father's studio was a gathering place for those minds concerned with the same questions of quality that plagued Pirsig.

"Pirsig didn't invent the term (quality),"
she said. "There was a lot of energy about it."

Pirsig himself speculates that his book's success had something to do with that cultural energy.

In the afterword to Zen, written several years after the book's initial publication, Pirsig says the materialism of the 1970s was at a turning point when the book hit the shelves. Material success had been the dream of generations of Americans, but people were beginning to reject that definition of success.

The book, the author reflects, expands what "success" means, to something more than just a good job and keeping your nose clean.

"It gives a positive goal to work toward that does not confine," Pirsig writes. "The whole culture happened to be looking for exactly what this book has to offer."

Those questions and desires are still present in many of the pilgrims who make their way south of Bozeman to the DeWeese house, where conversations with visitors often run late into the night.

Some pilgrims are more communicative than others about the reasons for their trips, DeWeese said. She's had the curious, the fanatical, videographers, documentarians and travelers

from around the world. DeWeese keeps track of their names and stories as best she can.

Some focus on the ideas; others are more concerned with finding Pirsig's exact route or learning details about his life. Sometimes, DeWeese worries that the ones obsessed with the physical side of the trip are missing something important.

"I don't want to be critical of these people because they are genuinely seeking, but what they're seeking has greater depth than (what) some of them are seeing," she said.

Quality counted

That depth is evidence of the book's greatness, according to Michael Sexson, a professor of English at MSU and a longtime friend of Bob and Gennie DeWeese.

Sexson recalls he wasn't initially impressed with the book when he first learned of it from the DeWeeses in 1972. The couple told him that someone had written a book in which they were characters, and they let him look at the manuscript.

"I thought it was very nice that someone had written this book about my friends, but I didn't have any hopes for a book titled Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance," he said.

First impressions, a concept important in Pirsig's philosophy, aren't always right, Sexson learned. By 1974, when Sexson was finishing his doctorate at Syracuse University, everyone was talking about the book.

"It was one of the very rare occasions in which a book of depth and challenging quality actually got a public reputation on a popular level," he said.

"Pirsig has done something miraculous and amazing," Sexson continued, "which is that he has given us a secular version of a sacred text."

Evidence comes in the form of the pilgrims tracing Pirsig's route. Imitation of a divine or ritual act is the very definition of mythology, he said.

"Some would say, 'Why don't these people think for themselves? Why are they so attached to this book?' But that's not a problem," Sexson said. "Ninety-nine percent of the

people in the world are not the people who did the thing but who want to imitate the thing that was done."

Pilgrims may trace Pirsig's travel route, but few seek to imitate the actual Robert Pirsig who taught at MSC.

Pirsig portrays his professorial self, Phaedrus, as a taskmaster. In Zen, Phaedrus frustrates his students with impossible, confusing assignments, such as telling them to write about the backs of their thumbs. One term, Pirsig withheld grades, driving students up the walls wondering how they were doing in the class. Another time, he drove students to rage and tears by asking them to define "quality" in an essay.

Phaedrus "became much talked about, a controversial figure," Pirsig wrote. "The majority of students avoided his sections like the Black Death. They had heard too many stories."

Student remembrances of Pirsig are rare. A few interviews with students, published online by researcher Henry Gurr, paint Pirsig the teacher as a bore whose fascination with the American West and its trappings, along with his mannerisms, clearly marked him as an outsider.

Pirsig's publicly stated opinions of Montana State didn't help him fit in either. He saw the politics between the university and the state government as contrary to the university's educational purpose; he wrote letters urging an investigation into the workload for MSC teachers; and he pointed out policy violations to the Northwest Regional Accrediting Association.

Yet, for all its faults in Pirsig's eyes, MSC was perhaps the most important place in his life. It was there that an idle comment from a colleague--"I hope you are teaching Quality to your students"--got him thinking so deeply that he lost his mind.

Retracing connections

While MSU was significant to Pirsig's writings, his significance at MSU had faded over time. Despite the summer pilgrimage of Pirsig devotees, the place believed to be his old office is now a storeroom. While an occasional class might use something written by Pirsig, focused study of the author has been rare.

That was before Charlie Pinkava got involved. For the past year Pinkava, who teaches sections of the University College's

Liberal Studies' freshman seminar courses, has taught sections of his class devoted entirely to Zen.

"We do a lot of Socratic questioning, answering questions with questions," Pinkava said. "The kids just really seem to get into it a lot, more so than I have seen in my other classes."

In his first Pirsig class, in fall 2009, students really connected with the subject. They wrote postcards to Pirsig, who is 82 and living in Maine, and even received a grateful response from the notoriously reclusive author. Some students spent their weekends re-tracing Pirsig's journeys in the mountains south of Bozeman.

Most memorably, the course produced what is, so far, the only marker that celebrates Pirsig's MSC years: a small plaque that now hangs in the provost's office. Pinkava hopes that is only a temporary resting place on the way to some place more visible.

The course's popularity with students contrasts with the book's seemingly diminished popularity among general readers. Fewer people may read Zen now, but that doesn't make its lessons any less relevant, Pinkava said.

"Kids are looking for a purpose," he said. "It's not all just about getting out and getting a job and making a lot of bucks and rocking off into the sunset. They want to make a difference."

Molly Buchacher, a freshman philosophy student taking the Pirsig class last fall, found that the book put into words many of the things she has only thought about vaguely before.

A Bozeman native, Buchacher, 21, dropped out of high school and attended Bozeman's Bridger Alternative Program to earn her GED.

"It's taken me a long time to get into this whole school thing," she said.

Buchacher considers the Pirsig class the best one she has ever taken because the material made it easy to connect her life to her education. Much of the class discussion focused on the students' lives and thoughts, she said, "things you normally don't talk about with people in your age group."

"This is one class I'll remember everything I've learned in and continue to apply it," Buchacher said. "I would fight for this to be taught to every freshman."

It's all in the journey

Lee Glover of Boise, Idaho, is proof that Zen still speaks to seekers.

Glover picked up a copy of Zen at a garage sale for a quarter in 2005. He read the first half and was not impressed, so, like many people, he set it aside.

A few years later, Glover accepted early retirement from his technology job. While searching for his next big thing, he rediscovered his copy of Zen. After he learned about Pirsig's insanity, it all clicked.

"A great work of literature draws people in for various reasons," Glover, 51, said. "I think that book is an incredible example of different people deriving different meanings from something that resonates with them in some profound way."

Pirsig took his trip in 1968, the same year Glover's father, suffering from his own mental breakdown, was sent to prison for armed robbery.

That slim connection resonated with Glover, growing from a lone idea, to his own Zen pilgrimage, then to a three-year film project.

"The book described my life," he said. "It sounds weird to say, but literally, figuratively and philosophically, it describes my life growing up."

What started as a simple travel film became a major project, entwining his father-son relationship with the one portrayed in Zen.

Glover has since interviewed more than a dozen Pirsig Pilgrims, researchers and scholars about the book. He hopes to have his film done sometime in 2011.

"Journeys of life are pretty important," he said.

"Take a journey like that, and who knows what might happen? It might change your life." ■

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