

# PIRSIG'S JOURNEY

Dennis Davis



## Upcoming Documentary about **ROBERT PIRSIG**, Author of **Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance**

It is rare for a book to become a culture-bearer and it's equally extraordinary that such a book, focusing largely on philosophy, goes on to sell five million copies. Today, thirty-four years on, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* continues to sell in the tens of thousands per year. Clearly, this is no ordinary book and its author, Robert Pirsig (1928–2017) was not an ordinary fellow.

When I first met Dr. Henry Gurr in Bozeman, he was a professor of nuclear physics from South Carolina Aiken. He was looking for MSU's Montana Hall with the intent of visiting the classroom where, in the late 1950s, Robert Pirsig taught Rhetoric and English Composition to freshmen in what was then known as Montana State College. Gurr was in the middle of the same 2,700-mile journey that Pirsig describes in his book. Many others, now known as Pirsig Pilgrims, have likewise been inspired to take that same trip, which begins in Saint Paul, Minnesota, over the Rockies to the West Coast, then along the Pacific Coast Highway to San Francisco, across some of the most gorgeous landscapes of the American west. I can now count myself as one of Pirsig's Pilgrims!

This past December, I met Manola Carter, who

was in the process of starting a production company whose mission is to make films that contribute positively to the world. I mentioned my interest in making a documentary about Robert Pirsig and his famous novel. Now, eight months later, we've recently returned from a trip along Pirsig's same route, doing location scouting for our

upcoming shoot in July of 2019.

But Pirsig's book is as much an inner journey as it is an outer road trip. After struggling to regain an understanding of this inner self, dissipated from 27 sessions of electro shock treatments to relieve a deep depression, Robert Pirsig used this road trip to allow his former self to return for the sake of his son, who took the trip with him. Along the way, Pirsig's deep insights have inspired scholars and enthusiasts to this day.

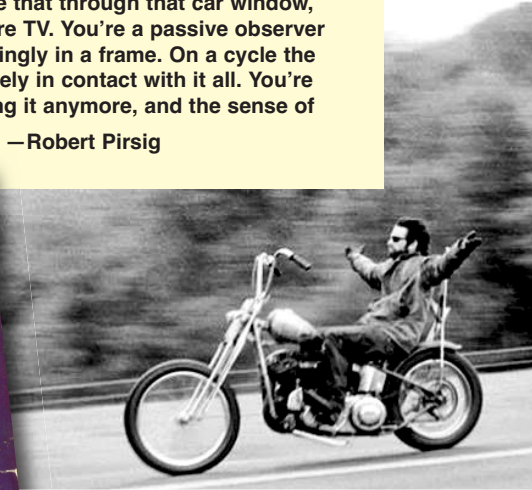
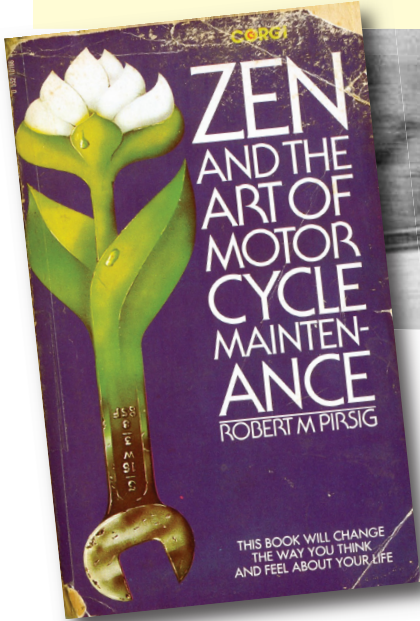
We recently shot our first interview with David Buchanan, one of the many scholars of Pirsig's philosophy, in Denver. His animated explanations of

Pirsig's musings on the Metaphysics of Quality were clear and interesting. For Pirsig, philosophy is barren if it doesn't enrich people's lives. In his view, Quality is divided into both Static and Dynamic aspects. Dynamic Quality is an experience, while Static Quality is a manifestation derived from that experience.



Robert Pirsig and his son Chris, with John Sutherland, on the Beartooth Pass.

“In a car, you’re always in a compartment, and because you’re used to it, you don’t realize that through that car window, everything you see is just more TV. You’re a passive observer and it’s all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle the frame is gone. You’re completely in contact with it all. You’re in the scene—not just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming.” —Robert Pirsig



The struggle was so intense that he would stay awake for nights studying, analyzing, and picking apart the ancient Greeks. His relentless schedule, combined with not eating, began to take its toll on him. During this cycle of intense, determined fixation, he would just stare at the wall for days. He became so depressed that he suffered a mental breakdown, ending with him being committed to a psychiatric institution, where he underwent a series of electroshock treatments.

It is akin to Pirsig’s interest in Zen Buddhism, where the goal of meditation is to maintain a state of “beginner’s mind.” The experience occurs between thoughts, transcending thinking, and becomes pure awareness. It is said that at this level of awareness, the Universe is perfect, beautiful, serene and ever new.

In Hindu philosophy, for example, Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras teach how the mind can come to a place of rest, with its incessant inner chatter stopped. In this state of mind, a Higher Mind can come into awareness of the One. There, it is possible to experience a transcendental tranquility and joy, which is said to be ever present and available to our outer awareness.

Would this be describing Pirsig’s value of Quality in its purest sense? While hoping to pursue his Ph.D. and teaching in the Midwest (denied to him, as it

turns out), Pirsig saw the need for a new philosophical school of thought that would bridge the gap between science, religion, and art. He wanted to influence the dynamic counterculture of the 1970s and to give it more direction and purpose. He saw that while science had provided numerous technologies that make life easier, the culture it produced tended to be impersonal, unfeeling, and alienating to the human spirit.

But his determined efforts to gain traction with his professors at Chicago University hit a wall. They were not interested in a new philosophical approach to life and were content, and protective of what the classical Greek philosophers had imparted to the west. Pirsig saw himself as a fighter, willing to take on these professors, but he was failing.

He awoke one day clueless about where and who he was. His depression was gone, but so was his memory! After donning a socially acceptable personality, he gained his freedom from the mental hospital. His deeply troubled self was no longer dominant, but neither was it fully eradicated. It lingered like a ghost whom he came to acknowledge, naming it Phaedrus. He then felt compelled to discover just who this Phaedrus was, and what had led to his breakdown. As he went through his notebooks, he began to piece things together. It then occurred

to him to undertake a cross-country trip. He wanted to revisit the places that were of importance to his alter ego, Phaedrus, and to see if this trip might reconnect him to his past and his important insights.

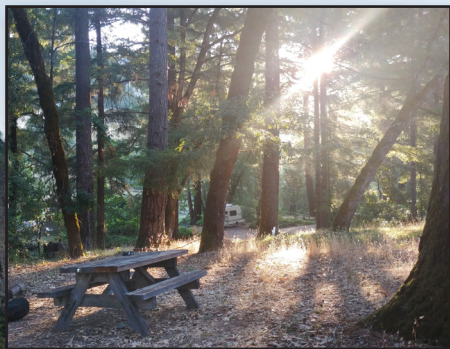
His 11-year-old son Chris did not like his dad’s new bland and disconnected



Interview with philosopher David Buchanan for the upcoming documentary. He corresponded extensively with Pirsig on the *Metaphysics of Quality*.



## PIRSIG'S JOURNEY...



One of the campsites used by Robert and Chris Pirsig.



View of Casper, CA, along the Pacific Coast Highway.



Camera used by videographer Dennis Davis in filming along Pirsig's journey, with South Dakota farmlands in the background.

outer personality and longed for the father he had loved. His book emerged from an essay on philosophical ideas he wanted to share with his friend John Sutherland. When finally completed, five years later, it became a means to relate his psychological struggles, to share his philosophy, to chronicle his reemerging relationship with his son, and to give the reader a description of the beautiful landscapes along the way. What was denied him by the professors in Chicago poured forth instead to the

public in a highly readable story. His book ended up being far more influential than an academic treatise would have been. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values* has been called the best selling book on philosophy ever written. It is a compelling example of the rise of a phoenix from the ashes.

This is a story well worth telling—and it's why Manola Carter and I have decided to make *Pirsig's Journey*. It will provide much grist for thought, including an exploration of shock therapy and its use still today. It will cover the social stigma that surrounds mental illness and the need to correct those misconceptions surrounding it. It will explore Pirsig's emergence and his impact as a philosopher, featuring interviews with some of Pirsig's most avid fans and proponents. The gorgeous visuals in the recreation of his journey provide the perfect backdrop.

Our documentary will introduce Pirsig's seminal work, first set down in 1974, and now translated into 27 languages, to a younger generation. It will stimulate intergenerational dialog and provide us Baby Boomers a revisit with a very dear friend. ■



## PIRSIG'S JOURNEY

**2020 Theatrical Release**

A documentary about the life, ideas and journey of Rober Pirsig, author of *The Zen of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values*

**Dennis Davis • Writer & Director**  
**Manola Carter • Three Fold Flame Productions**

**Let's do this together!**

We're looking for collaborators!

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