

CONVERSATION WITH

ROBERT M. PIRSIG

The man whose best-selling book introduced Zen to the art of motorcycle maintenance applies his intellect to the failures of Sixties radicalism, to the roots of black/white antagonism and to the idea that the insane may be smarter than anyone else

In the summer of 1968, Robert M. Pirsig and his 11-year-old son Chris set out on a motorcycle trip from Minnesota to San Francisco. That journey became the basis for "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance," a book that has sold more than half a million copies, has been selected as a Book-of-the-Month Club offering and was listed as one of the best books of 1974 by both Time and Newsweek—all of which is a lot of fuss for a serious work with a whimsical title.

Pirsig is the first to point out that "Zen" has little to do with either orthodox Zen Buddhism or motorcycles. The book has been called everything from a psychomelodrama to a story of "mysteries both ultimate and intimate"; The New Yorker compared it to "Moby Dick."

Pirsig tries to keep a low profile. He was driven into retreat by the blast of his early publicity, and now most intruders are excluded by his wife, Nancy. Pirsig himself refuses to answer the telephone at the family home in St. Paul. He prefers to be undisturbed—to think for hours while slouched in an armchair.

Born in 1928 in St. Paul, Pirsig finished his first year of college at the age of 15. Two years later, he was on probation because of failing grades. He enlisted in the Army, hoping to be sent to Germany, but he was shipped instead to Korea. This turned out to be a stroke of good fortune, because he fell in love with the Orient and began studying Zen Buddhism. As he says in his book, his experiences in the East made him feel "like someone or some creature that has found an exit from a cage he did not even know was around him."

When he finally returned to Minnesota, Pirsig married, picked up an M.A. in journalism and went to work as a writer of technical manuals. In 1958, he began to teach freshman rhetoric at Montana State. Pressured both by his workload and by Montana's conservatism, and intellectually obsessed with the quality of his teaching, Pirsig left Montana in 1960 to enter a Ph.D. program in philosophy at the University of Chicago. There, while studying full time and teaching full time to support his family, Pirsig collapsed. As it is told in "Zen": "He tells his wife to leave with the children, to consider themselves separated. Fear of loathsomeness and shame disappear when his urine flows not deliberately but naturally on

the floor of the room. Fear of pain, the pain of the martyrs, is overcome when cigarettes burn not deliberately but naturally down into his fingers until they are extinguished by blisters formed by their own heat. His wife sees his injured hands and the urine on the floor and calls for help."

In 1962, Pirsig was released from a mental hospital—"cured" by 28 transmissions of high-voltage current through the lobes of his brain. Unable to secure work as a teacher, he went back to technical writing. Since his illness, Pirsig seems to have entered a period of consolidation similar to that experienced by the narrator of "Zen"—a pacified family man trying to put the pieces back together.

"Zen" chronicles a man's pursuit of quality. To use the subtitle of the book, it is "an inquiry into values." As the cross-country journey unfolds, the reader is given a series of Chautauquas ("old-time series of popular talks intended to edify and entertain"), in which Pirsig deals with the philosophical and metaphysical questions occupying him.

On another level, "Zen" is the story of the narrator's coming to grips with his former, pre-hospitalization self, in the form of a ghostlike fantasy character named Phaedrus. Phaedrus was an uncompromising genius, a brilliant, questioning man who, under the burden of his ideas, went mad, was institutionalized, was given shock therapy and died. Passing through the Montana town where he once taught college, the narrator finds himself on the verge of insanity again and is forced to confront a Phaedrus risen from memory's grave.

Christie Hefner was able to interview Pirsig, despite his elusiveness, at his home in St. Paul. "I was directed to a white green-shuttered house that was distinguished only by the well-traveled camper parked in front of it. Pirsig greeted me warmly at the door. The struggle and pain of his past is etched on his face, as if he has lived much longer than 47 years, but his manner was relaxed and friendly. He speaks in paragraphs, easily and intensely, as he explains himself and his book. During the 18 hours I spent with him, he never changed from blue slacks, a plaid flannel shirt, green socks and blue sneakers. His outfit seemed to set the mood, and I felt more like a visiting relative than an intruding journalist."

OUI: One reviewer said of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* that it's always nice to meet another fellow who says he can see the light at the end

of another tunnel. Does your optimism extend to the future of the country?

PIRSIG: Yes, I feel hopeful. Those people who were rebelling in the Sixties are

growing up and growing older and acquiring a more compassionate attitude than that which existed in the past. There was an awful lot of hatred around

ROBERT M. PIRSIG *One technical manual that I wrote actually caused an engineer to break into tears when he read it. He'd designed this thing and felt it hadn't been appreciated properly.*

at the end of the Sixties, but I think the whole country has gotten that hatred out of its system.

OUI: Is your optimism based to any degree on the success of *Zen*, particularly its popularity among college students?

PIRSIG: The fact that people have picked up on *Zen*, which is essentially a nonhating book, is something I do find significant. In the Sixties, people wouldn't have bothered to read the book, mostly because they were too busy hating one group or another. Now I think the attitude of the "straights" has softened greatly, and so has the attitude of those who used to attack them—the hippies, or the left. The anger of these antagonists has now run its course, and people are looking for constructive solutions rather than for destructive solutions. The popularity of and support for my book have given me a very warm, calm, sunlit feeling.

OUI: Aside from the fact that people aren't fighting in the streets, what signs do you see that are encouraging?

PIRSIG: Well, first, I think that the Sixties' antagonism between the materially oriented way of life and the nonmaterial orientation—I don't know what it was oriented *toward*; it was more of a rejection than an affirmation—has produced new attitudes of human cohesiveness that will get stronger and stronger. I think that, as the Seventies progress, we're going to discover people cooperating to a degree that they have never cooperated before. Possibly we will get a whole new shape for the mythos, with people all over the country finding better ways to look at life. In the past, we've been oriented in the direction of head stuffing, but now we seem oriented toward head emptying and toward the idea that if you're going to reform the world, you had better start by examining what is in your own head and heart. Quality isn't the tinsel you hang on the tree.

OUI: Your book—which is subtitled "An Inquiry into Values"—describes your personal search for real quality, for what is best. Is that something we should all be doing?

PIRSIG: Yes, to the extent that the drive for quality is a natural drive. Everybody wants to do things better; everybody wants to have things better. Nobody wants anything worse than it was before. So my saying you should seek quality is just to emphasize the obvious, except that people have forgotten it, because it's gotten all covered up by rules and formulas and explanations. When you're on a job, the most important satisfaction isn't the pay. The pay just feeds, clothes

and shelters you. The real satisfaction is the amount of good you can do.

OUI: That's fine for a writer or professional like you, but what about an assembly-line worker? What about the quality of *his* life?

PIRSIG: The boredom that people complain about in factory life is a relationship between the person and the factory; it has nothing to do with the factory itself. After all, if you can stare at a wall for seven days and find your life fulfilling, as Zen believers do, factory work becomes a glorious experience. I'm trying to get industrialists interested in a form of training by which their workers can overcome the normal tedium that they feel in their jobs. The industrialists wonder what all this freakish, Oriental stuff has got to do with anything, and yet we've been told by some employers that they would hire anybody we can find for them—even now, in the recession—because the Zen believers who have worked in their factories have been superior employees. A person who's had the self-discipline to sit for days staring at a wall has the self-discipline to take on any kind of dull, boring job, and to see the options for quality in it.

OUI: It's hard to see what's so great about turning a wrench all day.

PIRSIG: Technical writing is a good example, because it's the dullest, most boring kind of writing. Yet I found that within tech writing on digital-computer hardware—electronic circuits and the ways in which they're arranged—the range for quality was enormous. The writing I did for those computer manuals was some of the most gratifying work I've ever done.

OUI: But still not as gratifying as writing *Zen* and coming up with a best seller, right?

PIRSIG: In both cases, the options for quality are infinite. In mathematics, however, there are orders of infinity: infinities that are infinities of infinities. So I preferred to write *Zen*, because of the higher order of infinity. But in each case, you can have a good time. One technical manual that I wrote actually caused an engineer to break into tears when he read it. He'd designed this thing and felt it hadn't been appreciated properly. When he saw my manual, he knew that I understood its worth, and it pleased him so much he burst into tears.

OUI: Who decides what has quality?

PIRSIG: I can't put quality into an exact intellectual framework for you any more than the Zen Buddhists can put the dharma that they speak of into an absolute framework: Whatever framework you choose is always less than the

dharma itself, and whatever definition you give of quality is always less than quality itself. This conflict between those who say there's such a thing as quality and those who try to create a dialectical framework for it is the substance of many Socratic dialogs. Socrates always asked people, "What do you mean by the Good?"

OUI: How would a Zen believer answer that question?

PIRSIG: The Zen master might say, "Well, it's right in front of you." Or he might bop him on the head, or point to the ground, or throw him out—anything to make him realize the existential situation of the Good—that the Good is not something that can be captured in a little box of dialectic; it is a total environment.

OUI: If Quality and Good are as obvious and absolute as you say, then why do people have endless arguments and debates on their true nature? The chances are that no two people will agree on the quality of, say, life.

PIRSIG: This question is so enormous that it actually produced the basic idea of my next book. I think this difference in value judgments has produced more unhappiness, more conflicts, more wars and more evil than almost any other single source. The idea that something is rigidly good or rigidly true and cannot change or cannot be relative for different people leads to a kind of irretractable conflict that can't be resolved except by violence.

OUI: That sounds like recent history.

PIRSIG: The period of the Sixties is a pretty good example of two different sets of values in conflict: the old American work ethic versus a kind of romantic revolution against those fixed values. I think what may have produced that is simply the fact that all of the old peasant value goals that had built America had suddenly reached fruition. The peasant cultures of Europe were all characterized by one single thing that all peasants shared and that deeply motivated their entire characters: the knowledge that there was *never enough*. Whenever there was plenty, which wasn't often, the bandits or the aristocrats would take it from them. So every peasant lived a life in which he was constantly striving to get more, more, more—and never achieving it. When he came to America, the aristocrats were gone, and soon he was getting enough. But he still doesn't know how to stop. I think the acquisitive, ambitious values of the type of parents who were satirized in the film *The Graduate* can (Continued on page 123)

PIRSIG *Politics is the art of the possible, not of the ideal.*

(Continued from page 68) be traced back to this old peasant morality.

OUI: Do you think this is changing?

PIRSIG: Yes, I do. The kids today have seen that accumulation of material things isn't any good anymore; that this value has lost its quality and that people have got to look somewhere else for motivation. This conflict is really what's caused the generation gap, this change in the style of life between 1950 and now. The kids born after World War Two can't see the idea of leading a life of sacrifice simply to have a bigger car. This is a perfect example of what I mean by the dynamics of quality: You can't fix quality in any object; you cannot put quality on a Cadillac, because if somebody—like one of these kids—has had a car all his life, a Cadillac isn't going to be a big deal.

OUI: How are value differences resolved?

PIRSIG: Actually, the democratic process was based upon an attempt to resolve value differences. It obviously doesn't always satisfy everyone; sometimes it doesn't satisfy anyone very much; sometimes the result is hopeless mediocrity. But, my God, what's better? Politics is the art of the possible, not the art of the ideal.

OUI: But that contradicts your statements in *Zen* that "if we are going to reform the world, and make it a better place to live in, the way to do it is not with talk about relationships of a political nature. . . . My personal feeling is that this is how any further improvement of the world will be done: by individuals making Quality decisions and that's all."

PIRSIG: When the Buddhists chant, they say, "We sit for the benefit of all beings." From a Western standpoint, we think, "Now, how the hell is sitting and staring at the wall going to help anybody?" But if you receive a load of crap from somebody else and you don't pass it on—ever—well, then, that's a real moral improvement in the world. It's something each person can do for himself. An awful lot of what passes for morality in this country is actually a pseudo morality: people running around with wonderful programs for somebody else to follow, or supporting good causes in evil ways. It really burns me up when people catch on to something very important and good and use it as a vehicle for their own meanness.

OUI: Which people? Who's been using what as a vehicle for his own meanness?

PIRSIG: Well, I was one of the very early Beats, and it seemed to me that every year it got a little worse as more and more mean individuals attached themselves to the Beat movement. I guess the SDS and the Weathermen



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ROBERT M. PIRSIG *Hitler used to say that if you want to find good Fascists take good Communists—they both have the desire to do somebody else in. The actual cause was not the main thing.*

were going that way, too. These were people who claimed to be fighting for the revolution, but they were actually just fighting. I didn't see any idealism in what they were doing, just an immediate meanness. And those same people could now shift over to some other movement and get their meanness out that way. Hitler used to say that if you want to find good Fascists take good Communists—they both have the desire to do somebody else in. The actual cause they were supporting was not the main thing. If you're going to beat somebody up, then, of course, you want to attach yourself to a noble cause for which to do the beating—it makes you look a lot better. I think the civil rights movement got that way toward the end.

OUI: In what way?

PIRSIG: Nancy and I were pretty strong civil rights people, but I can remember one turning point for us. We were in a civil rights march in Milwaukee, and people were shouting, "Before I'll be a slave, I'll put a Polack in his grave." All of a sudden it wasn't civil rights anymore; it was just ethnic hatred coming out. That's how the shift comes, you see. What started out as a movement for justice had become a movement to do in other people. At that point, we backed off from the whole thing. It wasn't because the civil rights cause was wrong but because a lot of evil people were attaching themselves to it for their own personal gain. They killed it.

OUI: Can you really blame blacks for getting fed up? The fight didn't seem to be going anyplace.

PIRSIG: Well, the people who weren't going to wait were the people who hadn't been around very long. They were all young people who were just coming in at the bottom. All of a sudden it had become not a question of justice versus injustice but a question of black versus white, and that was exactly the evil that had started the whole thing going in the first place.

OUI: You sound like the disillusioned liberal who doesn't think being black makes any difference.

PIRSIG: Perhaps, but in my second book I'm going to walk in the face of the liberal tradition that says that people are essentially the same. I'm saying that people are essentially different. My belief is that the source of the racial situation is not, as the northern liberals claim, 200 years of racial bigotry. I don't think anything lasts that long on its own. I also don't think it's a case of genetic differences, as the Southerners claim. Instead, I think there are

very deep cultural differences, value differences, between the black community and the white community, and those are the sources of the trouble.

OUI: Aren't the value differences between whites and blacks the result, not the cause, of money and class conflict? What's the difference between a poor white family's values and a poor black's?

PIRSIG: I'd be walking into a storm if I tried to answer that. It's too early to talk about what I'm finding within the family that seems to correlate with cultural differences, because I can't substantiate everything statistically.

OUI: Well, if blacks and whites do have essentially different value systems, where is the hope for unity?

PIRSIG: If you can find the sources of the differences, you can also find the sources of cohesiveness. I'm applying the metaphysics of quality and trying to figure out what it is that causes cultures to hate one another year after year.

OUI: The way the public has responded to your first book must give you a lot of support. Are your peers in the academic profession equally supportive?

PIRSIG: The opposition isn't even forming. Oh, individuals may take the book or leave it, but no one is really actively opposing it. At first, the general reaction in the academic community was "Stand back, don't touch it." It was strange and unusual, because most people were not really certain of what I was talking about. The ideas were always presented as insane ideas, so they couldn't be knocked down: What could you say after I'd said they're insane?

OUI: Last summer, when *Zen* became a best seller, you were so disturbed by the sudden popularity and attention that one morning you just packed up your camper and bolted to the mountains of Montana. How are you coping now?

PIRSIG: It was a shock to have my private world become the talk of the nation. All my life I've been an outsider, ready to live on the perimeter of society. Now that's not necessary anymore. There's a general public acceptance of what I say. Naturally I have to be cautious about that. I'm always waiting for the Oswald in the crowd, and there's an Oswald in every crowd. Just at the moment you take on the crowd with open arms, there goes the bullet. I don't think this is paranoia. Famous people attract nuts. I am wary of the dangers of popularity. It's new to me, and in any new situation I'm naturally going to be sniffing around for trouble, looking for traps, because I've been that way all my life. *Zen* is based on a very solid, conservative, comfort-

able family life. With all that background, I'm not looking for any new battles to join.

OUI: If you're not interested in reforming the world, why do you write books?

PIRSIG: People write because they can't think of anything better to do.

OUI: Isn't writing rewarding for you?

PIRSIG: No. But that's a little misleading, because it's my life. It's like asking, "Has breathing been rewarding for you?" Yes, in a sense, it has. I wouldn't be around if I hadn't been breathing all this time. Similarly, writing is something I just do. I never encourage anybody else to write. In fact, if somebody feels forced to write, I feel sorry for him.

OUI: Are writers more sensitive to quality than people in other professions?

PIRSIG: Writers—and artists in general—don't seem to suffer as much as most men from the 20th Century problem of separating what man is from what man does. That's a real sickness of modern times: that feeling of isolation from everything. It's created by this I-am-sitting-on-an-invisible-platform-looking-at-the-world point of view. Nobody is ever on a platform looking at the world; everybody pretends he is. The reality is that we're all deeply involved in the world and always will be; there's no way out of it. The Zen experience and the artistic experience are to try to destroy this platform isolation and to help you to exist—this moment, right now.

OUI: Some critics would argue that an artist's work must be judged by an independent standard.

PIRSIG: Critics are much further from reality than artists. They repeat what they've heard somewhere, whereas artists try to see directly where they're at. When a critic asked the poet A. E. Housman to define poetry, which is not an unusual critical concern, Housman said, "I can no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat." Yet, the terrier knows the rat, whether he can define it or not. This isn't a mystical process; he just knows a rat when he sees one.

OUI: There's a lot in your book that concerns insanity. Are you speaking especially to mental patients?

PIRSIG: Yes. And when the book came out, I got quite a number of letters from people who wanted help with mental problems. When I get a letter from somebody who's been hospitalized, particularly if he's undergone shock treatments, I always pay extra attention to what he's saying, because I feel as if he's really one of my people. Sometimes I think of myself as an ex-con. Everybody

has to identify with some group, but the insane don't have many people on the outside to identify with, except in a therapeutic way. But even psychiatrists don't always seem to realize that the insane are distinguished more by their uniqueness than by their uniformity.

OUI: Why?

PIRSIG: If a doctor goes through a ward once a day, or semiweekly, then he's not going to really catch on to what it is about a particular patient's program that is so unique that it makes him unfit for human society. But, if he goes into a hospital and is very quiet for a long period of time, then these people will reveal themselves—in the same way that animals will come out of a forest when they think no one's around. The outer life of the insane is obviously rotten: They've been rejected and locked up, they're regarded as social misfits, or unfits. Yet their inner lives are usually extremely rich, extremely sensitive. The people on the ward are some of the most interesting people I know. One of the revelations that I had in the hospital was that nature is very cruel, and that society, as an instrument of the tribal structure of nature, will throw out culls. I was being culled out. There was no use for me, so I had to be rejected. It's very cruel when it happens to you, but this is the way nature works. I think insanity is the mind's way of solving problems that cannot be solved in any other way: A person just stops.

OUI: Would Zen be more beneficial to the insane than conventional psychiatry?

PIRSIG: Yes, I would say that it would almost take a Zen master, or Rōshi, to reach the insane, because the Rōshi doesn't assert any special personality of his own. He simply centers himself on the situation that exists.

OUI: Would you go so far as to say that Zen can cure insanity?

PIRSIG: Whether the Zen people can do anything about insanity remains to be seen. But I intuitively feel that people locked up in the hospital are actually on the verge of the enlightenment experience that Zen Buddhists push you toward by giving you insoluble mental problems and saying, "Work on it, work on it, work on it," until, in effect, you have a breakdown. The insane are already at that point, but medical personnel keep dragging them back, saying they've got to return to the world of normalcy. Instead of dragging them back, it might be possible to push them on through to a condition that Menninger described as "healthier than healthy"—where the person out of the hospital is better than he ever was before; not because of any cure but because the problems that were hanging him up before, the garbage that was in his system, have disappeared.

OUI: Is that what happened to you?

PIRSIG: I don't know. I can't say, because one of the things you can't do when you're insane is tell people what you think your real situation is. I may have been more sensitive and intelligent than the doctors in the hospital, but I'd already been identified there: I was insane. That's one of the hardest things to take: that an *ad hominem* verdict has been delivered against you that says that your opinion is no longer valid. What you think doesn't mean anything; the public will never accept anything you say. For an intellectual and for a writer, this is like excommunication from all human society.

OUI: Do you have to accept that verdict?

PIRSIG: Yes, you do, because if you fight it, then you'll get yourself into a one-sidedness that will lead to paranoia, or the symptoms of what's called paranoia. If you start saying, "I'm not insane"—and I did at the time—that just confirms people's opinions that you are. I've seen literature that says that one of the characteristics of the insane is that they think they're sane. It's a real Catch-22. I'd advise anybody who gets locked up never to argue with the turnkeys. Just go along with the situation.

OUI: That's advice on how to survive not how to get better. With that attitude, people could stay in hospitals and be labeled insane forever.

PIRSIG: There are two points of view: that of the ex-con and that of the outsider who views the con as a deviate from the good life. From the insider's point of view, I'd say that it's smart to go along. You're not going to convince anybody of anything once you're inside such a place; nobody's going to listen to you as a teller of truth. All they're going to listen for is symptoms. If they ask, "How are you feeling today?" don't say, "Fit as a fiddle." That means you're goofy, something's wrong. Just say, "Well, better; I'm improving." Then you're going along with them; they're presuming that you're sick and that they're going to cure you. You don't ever want to feed them information that will contradict their presumptions.

OUI: And what is the outsider's point of view?

PIRSIG: The outsider, of course, believes that you should tell the truth and gain self-confidence and understand that the people are there to help you, that life isn't so bad after all.

OUI: You said that the insane people you met in the hospital were extremely sensitive and interesting. Should society listen to its insane members more?

PIRSIG: Well, the Greeks, notably Socrates, claimed that the insane provided all sorts of insights that Greece wouldn't have had otherwise. The oracles and holy seers were often considered to be insane. Remember, sanity is always

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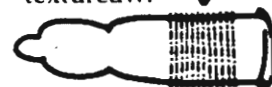
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ROBERT M. PIRSIG *If there were only one person in the world, it would be impossible for that person to be insane! The standard of insanity versus sanity is always based on a relationship between people.*

defined in terms of the status quo, and anybody who's wildly outside of the status quo is in danger of having his sanity doubted.

OUI: But there must be some objective standard of sanity.

PIRSIG: Most people don't realize how tremendously wide the potential range of human thought is. Insanity is some mental deviation, which simply means that the program running through an "insane" person's brain is different from the program running through other people's brains. This isn't necessarily a state of sickness. It can be simply a state of extreme nonconformity.

OUI: What do psychiatrists—the supposed experts—say about your opinions?

PIRSIG: A lot of them are interested. Actually, psychiatrists are a very open-minded group. Sometimes, because of my radical opinions on the nature of mental illness, I tend to make them look as if they were the enemy, but as a group of people in American society, psychiatrists are probably as liberal and open-minded a group as you can find.

OUI: You make psychiatrists sound like the Spanish inquisitors in *Zen* when you describe how convinced they are of their infallibility.

PIRSIG: Well, the mythos of the time of the Inquisition was the point of view of the Church of that time. Remember how in *St. Joan*, Shaw depicts the chief inquisitor as being well-meaning and as trying hard to help Joan resolve this terrible situation she's gotten into? It never occurred to him that *he* might be wrong and she right. The same is true with members of the psychiatric profession. I don't know what they'd do if they had to consider in each patient's case that the patient might be right and they wrong. It would probably make the whole profession unworkable. That's why I say that their primary job should not be to work out the *patient's* problems but to work out *society's* problems in relationship to the patient.

OUI: So, it's not psychiatrists but society that is the enemy?

PIRSIG: No, the real enemies are the guys who don't have a "beginner's mind" with regard to the situation. A beginner's mind is an important Zen concept in which one tries to see every minute of every day as if he were just a beginner. In the beginner's mind, there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind, there are only a few. Unfortunately, in psychiatry, you get a lot of experts who aren't aware of very many possibilities. There are only a few psychiatrists who have beginners' minds—R. D. Laing is one—and who understand that what is

wrong with the patient is not something inherent in the patient but something inherent in the relationship between the patient and the rest of society. The point is, if there were only one person in the world, it would be impossible for that person to be insane! The word would be meaningless. The standard of insanity versus sanity is always based on a relationship between people.

OUI: Which brings us back to your case. For you to be pronounced officially sane, you must have been able to re-order your relationship with society. How did you manage that?

PIRSIG: I remember thinking in the hospital that traditional, conventional rationality, as we conceive it in the West, is like a tightrope that I was awfully sick of walking. I thought, "I'm not going to get on that tightrope again. It's so hard. You have to be balancing all the time, making sure you say everything right." It's so relaxing to be insane. I didn't have to worry whether I was saying everything right. I could be completely open and never had to consider what was and wasn't crazy. It was like falling off the tightrope and discovering that it was much pleasanter and happier bouncing around in the net down there. Much of my free-running thought of that time formed the basis of *Zen*. I must say that it was with great reluctance that I climbed back on that tightrope—where I hope I am now.

OUI: But climb back you did. Why?

PIRSIG: I suppose for love of family more than anything else. The members of my family didn't understand what was happening to me, of course, and they were terribly upset. When it became evident that to continue to go my own way would have resulted in my permanent hospitalization at some state institution, I said, "This isn't doing anybody any good." It's hard to answer the question of why I came back, because, you see, after the shock treatments, a great many of the causes of what had happened were obliterated. I couldn't remember exactly what had brought me to where I was. I knew it was quite important, but since I had no recall, there wasn't a great dedication on my part to follow that course anymore. I did what people expected of me simply because I couldn't remember what it was that had prevented me from doing what they expected.

OUI: Is that what you're doing now? Or are you doing what you want?

PIRSIG: Right now it comes to the same thing: I'm doing what people expect of me, and that's what I want to do. I don't want to be isolated. Instead of wanting

to run away from people, I now want to run toward them and give them as much as I can. I'm finding that the longer you stay on the tightrope, the better your balance gets. You don't have the fear of falling anymore.

OUI: In *Zen*, you wrote, "Metaphysics is good if it improves everyday life; otherwise forget it." Considering that, why don't you mention sex in the book?

PIRSIG: I guess I'm kind of inhibited along those lines. Somehow that whole area of sex doesn't seem to be a public matter. The image that comes to my mind sometimes is the people at a zoo who gathered to watch a mother polar bear give birth to a cub. They all cheered when the cub came out, but then, to their horror, the mother picked up the cub and smashed it on the cement and walked away. What they didn't know was that polar bears always have to have their children in complete privacy. Somehow I feel like that mother polar bear on that subject. Anyway, I think we're moving back to a puritan thing.

OUI: What makes you think that?

PIRSIG: Wishful thinking, maybe. Or perhaps it's old age coming on. Frankly, I think people have run sex into the ground. Sex has always been The Great Mystery, and now people are trying to tear down that mystery. I resent that.

OUI: Your book has been called a modern Bible. How do you see other people benefiting from it?

PIRSIG: By realizing the old Zen one-liner: Every day is a good day. Although the situation of the narrator and Chris in a sense is very tragic, every day was a good day. The sun rose, the sky was fresh, there were new things to discover along the road, the day went on, the night came and next there was another day. That is the Zen level of the book: Despite whatever the past had been, whatever the future might be, there was a sense in the present of being alive.

OUI: *Zen's* focus is not on what is new but on what is best. What is best in your life?

PIRSIG: Sunlight. I wake up in the morning, and I'm happy if I see sunlight. The sun relates to how we feel, to our deepest instincts—a sunny day is more likely to be a happy day than one that's cloudy and gloomy. *Zen* is constantly being dedicated to the sun. The moods of the book's characters are closely associated to the positions of the sun in the sky, or the absence of the sun. I hate to see that evening sun go down; I find it very unnerving. The happiest moments in *Zen* are just after the narrator wakes up; this is true of me, as well, when I wake up and see that it's a sunny day. ■