

## Excerpt from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

Robert Pirsig

Today now I want to take up the first phase of his journey into Quality, the nonmetaphysical phase, and this will be pleasant. It's nice to start journeys pleasantly, even when you know they won't end that way. Using his class notes as reference material I want to reconstruct the way in which Quality became a working concept for him in the teaching of rhetoric. His second phase, the metaphysical one, was tenuous and speculative, but this first phase, in which he simply taught rhetoric, was by all accounts solid and pragmatic and probably deserves to be judged on its own merits, independently of the second phase.

He'd been innovating extensively. He'd been having trouble with students who had nothing to say. At first he thought it was laziness but later it became apparent that it wasn't. They just couldn't think of anything to say.

One of them, a girl with strong-lensed glasses, wanted to write a five-hundred-word essay about the United States. He was used to the sinking feeling that comes from statements like this, and suggested without disparagement that she narrow it down to just Bozeman.

When the paper came due she didn't have it and was quite upset. She had tried and tried but she just couldn't think of anything to say.

He had already discussed her with her previous instructors and they'd confirmed his impressions of her. She was very serious, disciplined and hardworking, but extremely dull. Not a spark of creativity in her anywhere. Her eyes, behind the thick-lensed glasses, were the eyes of a drudge. She wasn't bluffing him, she really couldn't think of anything to say, and was upset by her inability to do as she was told.

It just stumped him. Now he couldn't think of anything to say. A silence occurred, and then a peculiar answer: "Narrow it down to the main street of Bozeman." It was a stroke of insight.

She nodded dutifully and went out. But just before her next class she came back in real distress, tears this time, distress that had obviously been there for

a long time. She still couldn't think of anything to say, and couldn't understand why, if she couldn't think of anything about all of Bozeman, she should be able to think of something about just one street.

He was furious. "You're not looking!" he said. A memory came back of his own dismissal from the University for having too much to say. For every fact there is an infinity of hypotheses. The more you look the more you see. She really wasn't looking and yet somehow didn't understand this.

He told her angrily, "Narrow it down to the front of one building on the main street of Bozeman. The Opera House. Start with the upper left-hand brick."

Her eyes, behind the thick-lensed glasses, opened wide. She came in the next class with a puzzled look and handed him a five-thousand-word essay on the front of the Opera House on the main street of Bozeman, Montana. "I sat in the hamburger stand across the street," she said, "and started writing about the first brick, and the second brick, and then by the third brick it all started to come and I couldn't stop. They thought I was crazy, and they kept kidding me, but here it all is. I don't understand it."

Neither did he, but on long walks through the streets of town he thought about it and concluded she was evidently stopped with the same kind of blockage that had paralyzed him on his first day of teaching. She was blocked because she was trying to repeat, in her writing, things she had already heard, just as on the first day he had tried to repeat things he had already decided to say. She couldn't think of anything to write about Bozeman because she couldn't recall anything she had heard worth repeating. She was strangely unaware that she could look and see freshly for herself, as she wrote, without primary regard for what had been said before. The narrowing down to one brick destroyed the blockage because it was so obvious she had to do some original and direct seeing.

He experimented further. In one class he had everyone write all hour about the back of his thumb. Everyone gave him funny looks at the beginning of the hour, but everyone did it, and there wasn't a single complaint about "nothing to say."

In another class he changed the subject from the thumb to a coin, and got a full hour's writing from every student. In other classes it was the same. Some asked, "Do you have to write about both sides?" Once they got into the idea of seeing directly for themselves they also saw there was no limit to the amount

they could say. It was a confidence-building assignment too, because what they wrote, even though seemingly trivial, was nevertheless their own thing, not a mimicking of someone else's. Classes where he used that coin exercise were always less balky and more interested.

As a result of his experiments he concluded that imitation was a real evil that had to be broken before real rhetoric teaching could begin. This imitation seemed to be an external compulsion. Little children didn't have it. It seemed to come later on, possibly as a result of school itself.

That sounded right, and the more he thought about it the more right it sounded. Schools teach you to imitate. If you don't imitate what the teacher wants you get a bad grade. Here, in college, it was more sophisticated, of course; you were supposed to imitate the teacher in such a way as to convince the teacher you were not imitating, but taking the essence of the instruction and going ahead with it on your own. That got you A's. Originality on the other hand could get you anything...from A to F. The whole grading system cautioned against it.

He discussed this with a professor of psychology who lived next door to him, an extremely imaginative teacher, who said, "Right. Eliminate the whole degree-and-grading system and then you'll get real education."

Phædrus thought about this, and when weeks later a very bright student couldn't think of a subject for a term paper, it was still on his mind, so he gave it to her as a topic. She didn't like the topic at first, but agreed to take it anyway.

Within a week she was talking about it to everyone, and within two weeks had worked up a superb paper. The class she delivered it to didn't have the advantage of two weeks to think about the subject, however, and was quite hostile to the whole idea of eliminating grades and degrees. This didn't slow her down at all. Her tone took on an old-time religious fervor. She begged the other students to listen, to understand this was really right. "I'm not saying this for him," she said and glanced at Phædrus. "It's for you."

Her pleading tone, her religious fervor, greatly impressed him, along with the fact that her college entrance examinations had placed her in the upper one percent of the class. During the next quarter, when teaching "persuasive writing," he chose this topic as a "demonstrator," a piece of persuasive writing he worked up by himself, day by day, in front of and with the help of the class.

He used the demonstrator to avoid talking in terms of principles of composition, all of which he had deep doubts about. He felt that by exposing classes to his own sentences as he made them, with all the misgivings and hang-ups and erasures, he would give a more honest picture of what writing was like than by spending class time picking nits in completed student work or holding up the completed work of masters for emulation. This time he developed the argument that the whole grading system and degree should be eliminated, and to make it something that truly involved the students in what they were hearing, he withheld all grades during the quarter.

Just up above the top of the ridge the snow can be seen now. On foot it's many days away though. The rocks below it are too steep for a direct hiking climb, particularly with the heavy loads we are carrying, and Chris is way too young for any kind of ropes- and- pitons stuff. We must cross over the forested ridge we are now approaching, enter another canyon, follow it to its end and then come back at an upward angle along to the ridge. Three days hard to the snow. Four days easy. If we don't show up in nine, DeWeese will start looking for us.

We stop for a rest, sit down and brace against a tree so that we don't topple over backward from the packs. After a while I reach around over my shoulder, take the machete from the top of my pack and hand it to Chris.

"See those two aspens over there? The straight ones? At the edge?" I point to them. "Cut those down about a foot from the ground."

"Why?" "We'll need them later for hiking sticks and tent poles." Chris takes the machete, starts to rise but then settles back again. "You cut them," he says.

So I take the machete and go over and cut the poles. They both cut neatly in one swing, except for the final strip of bark, which I sever with the back hook of the machete. Up in the rocks you need the poles for balancing and the pine up above is no good for poles, and this is about the last of the aspen here. It bothers me a little though that Chris is turning down work. Not a good sign in the mountains.

A short rest and then on we go. It'll take a while to get used to this load. There's a negative reaction to all the weight. As we go on though, it'll become more natural -- .

Phædrus' argument for the abolition of the degree-and- grading system produced a nonplussed or negative reaction in all but a few students at first,

since it seemed, on first judgment, to destroy the whole University system. One student laid it wide open when she said with complete candor, "Of course you can't eliminate the degree and grading system. After all, that's what we're here for."

She spoke the complete truth. The idea that the majority of students attend a university for an education independent of the degree and grades is a little hypocrisy everyone is happier not to expose. Occasionally some students do arrive for an education but rote and the mechanical nature of the institution soon converts them to a less idealistic attitude.

The demonstrator was an argument that elimination of grades and degrees would destroy this hypocrisy. Rather than deal with generalities it dealt with the specific career of an imaginary student who more or less typified what was found in the classroom, a student completely conditioned to work for a grade rather than for the knowledge the grade was supposed to represent.

Such a student, the demonstrator hypothesized, would go to his first class, get his first assignment and probably do it out of habit. He might go to his second and third as well. But eventually the novelty of the course would wear off and, because his academic life was not his only life, the pressure of other obligations or desires would create circumstances where he just would not be able to get an assignment in.

Since there was no degree or grading system he would incur no penalty for this. Subsequent lectures which presumed he'd completed the assignment might be a little more difficult to understand, however, and this difficulty, in turn, might weaken his interest to a point where the next assignment, which he would find quite hard, would also be dropped. Again no penalty.

In time his weaker and weaker understanding of what the lectures were about would make it more and more difficult for him to pay attention in class. Eventually he would see he wasn't learning much; and facing the continual pressure of outside obligations, he would stop studying, feel guilty about this and stop attending class. Again, no penalty would be attached.

But what had happened? The student, with no hard feelings on anybody's part, would have flunked himself out. Good! This is what should have happened. He wasn't there for a real education in the first place and had no real business there at all. A large amount of money and effort had been saved and there would be no stigma of failure and ruin to haunt him the rest of his

life. No bridges had been burned.

The student's biggest problem was a slave mentality which had been built into him by years of carrot-and-whip grading, a mule mentality which said, "If you don't whip me, I won't work." He didn't get whipped. He didn't work. And the cart of civilization, which he supposedly was being trained to pull, was just going to have to creak along a little slower without him.

This is a tragedy, however, only if you presume that the cart of civilization, "the system," is pulled by mules. This is a common, vocational, "location" point of view, but it's not the Church attitude.

The Church attitude is that civilization, or "the system" or "society" or whatever you want to call it, is best served not by mules but by free men. The purpose of abolishing grades and degrees is not to punish mules or to get rid of them but to provide an environment in which that mule can turn into a free man.

The hypothetical student, still a mule, would drift around for a while. He would get another kind of education quite as valuable as the one he'd abandoned, in what used to be called the "school of hard knocks." Instead of wasting money and time as a high-status mule, he would now have to get a job as a low-status mule, maybe as a mechanic. Actually his real status would go up. He would be making a contribution for a change. Maybe that's what he would do for the rest of his life. Maybe he'd found his level. But don't count on it.

In time...six months; five years, perhaps...a change could easily begin to take place. He would become less and less satisfied with a kind of dumb, day-to-day shopwork. His creative intelligence, stifled by too much theory and too many grades in college, would now become reawakened by the boredom of the shop. Thousands of hours of frustrating mechanical problems would have made him more interested in machine design. He would like to design machinery himself. He'd think he could do a better job. He would try modifying a few engines, meet with success, look for more success, but feel blocked because he didn't have the theoretical information. He would discover that when before he felt stupid because of his lack of interest in theoretical information, he'd now find a brand of theoretical information which he'd have a lot of respect for, namely, mechanical engineering.

So he would come back to our degreeless and gradeless school, but with a

difference. He'd no longer be a grade-motivated person. He'd be a knowledge-motivated person. He would need no external pushing to learn. His push would come from inside. He'd be a free man. He wouldn't need a lot of discipline to shape him up. In fact, if the instructors assigned him were slacking on the job he would be likely to shape them up by asking rude questions. He'd be there to learn something, would be paying to learn something and they'd better come up with it.

Motivation of this sort, once it catches hold, is a ferocious force, and in the gradeless, degreeless institution where our student would find himself, he wouldn't stop with rote engineering information. Physics and mathematics were going to come within his sphere of interest because he'd see he needed them. Metallurgy and electrical engineering would come up for attention. And, in the process of intellectual maturing that these abstract studies gave him, he would be likely to branch out into other theoretical areas that weren't directly related to machines but had become a part of a newer larger goal. This larger goal wouldn't be the imitation of education in Universities today, glossed over and concealed by grades and degrees that give the appearance of something happening when, in fact, almost nothing is going on. It would be the real thing.

Such was Phædrus' demonstrator, his unpopular argument, and he worked on it all quarter long, building it up and modifying it, arguing for it, defending it. All quarter long papers would go back to the students with comments but no grades, although the grades were entered in a book.

As I said before, at first almost everyone was sort of nonplussed. The majority probably figured they were stuck with some idealist who thought removal of grades would make them happier and thus work harder, when it was obvious that without grades everyone would just loaf. Many of the students with A records in previous quarters were contemptuous and angry at first, but because of their acquired self-discipline went ahead and did the work anyway. The B students and high-C students missed some of the early assignments or turned in sloppy work. Many of the low-C and D students didn't even show up for class. At this time another teacher asked him what he was going to do about this lack of response.

"Outwait them," he said.

His lack of harshness puzzled the students at first, then made them suspicious. Some began to ask sarcastic questions. These received soft answers and the

lectures and speeches proceeded as usual, except with no grades.

Then a hoped-for phenomenon began. During the third or fourth week some of the A students began to get nervous and started to turn in superb work and hang around after class with questions that fished for some indication as to how they were doing. The B and high-C students began to notice this and work a little and bring up the quality of their papers to a more usual level. The low C, D and future F's began to show up for class just to see what was going on.

After midquarter an even more hoped-for phenomenon took place. The A-rated students lost their nervousness and became active participants in everything that went on with a friendliness that was uncommon in a grade-getting class. At this point the B and C students were in a panic, and turned in stuff that looked as though they'd spent hours of painstaking work on it. The D's and F's turned in satisfactory assignments.

In the final weeks of the quarter, a time when normally everyone knows what his grade will be and just sits back half asleep, Phædrus was getting a kind of class participation that made other teachers take notice. The B's and C's had joined the A's in friendly free-for-all discussion that made the class seem like a successful party. Only the D's and F's sat frozen in their chairs, in a complete internal panic.

The phenomenon of relaxation and friendliness was explained later by a couple of students who told him, "A lot of us got together outside of class to try to figure out how to beat this system. Everyone decided the best way was just to figure you were going to fail and then go ahead and do what you could anyway. Then you start to relax. Otherwise you go out of your mind!"

The students added that once you got used to it it wasn't so bad, you were more interested in the subject matter, but repeated that it wasn't easy to get used to.

At the end of the quarter the students were asked to write an essay evaluating the system. None of them knew at the time of writing what his or her grade would be. Fifty-four percent opposed it. Thirty-seven percent favored it. Nine percent were neutral.

On the basis of one man, one vote, the system was very unpopular. The majority of students definitely wanted their grades as they went along. But



when Phædrus broke down the returns according to the grades that were in his book...and the grades were not out of line with grades predicted by previous classes and entrance evaluations...another story was told. The A students were 2 to 1 in favor of the system. The B and C students were evenly divided. And the D's and F's were unanimously opposed!

This surprising result supported a hunch he had had for a long time: that the brighter, more serious students were the least desirous of grades, possibly because they were more interested in the subject matter of the course, whereas the dull or lazy students were the most desirous of grades, possibly because grades told them if they were getting by.

...

Phædrus thought withholding grades was good, according to his notes, but he didn't give it scientific value. In a true experiment you keep constant every cause you can think of except one, and then see what the effects are of varying that one cause. In the classroom you can never do this. Student knowledge, student attitude, teacher attitude, all change from all kinds of causes which are uncontrollable and mostly unknowable. Also, the observer in this case is himself one of the causes and can never judge his effects without altering his effects. So he didn't attempt to draw any hard conclusions from all this, he just went ahead and did what he liked.

The movement from this to his enquiry into Quality took place because of a sinister aspect of grading that the withholding of grades exposed. Grades really cover up failure to teach. A bad instructor can go through an entire quarter leaving absolutely nothing memorable in the minds of his class, curve out the scores on an irrelevant test, and leave the impression that some have learned and some have not. But if the grades are removed the class is forced to wonder each day what it's really learning. The questions, What's being taught? What's the goal? How do the lectures and assignments accomplish the goal? become ominous. The removal of grades exposes a huge and frightening vacuum.

What was Phædrus trying to do, anyway? This question became more and more imperative as he went on. The answer that had seemed right when he started now made less and less sense. He had wanted his students to become creative by deciding for themselves what was good writing instead of asking him all the time. The real purpose of withholding the grades was to force them to look within themselves, the only place they would ever get a really right

answer.

But now this made no sense. If they already knew what was good and bad, there was no reason for them to take the course in the first place. The fact that they were there as students presumed they did not know what was good or bad. That was his job as instructor...to tell them what was good or bad. The whole idea of individual creativity and expression in the classroom was really basically opposed to the whole idea of the University.

For many of the students, this withholding created a Kafkaesque situation in which they saw they were to be punished for failure to do something but no one would tell them what they were supposed to do. They looked within themselves and saw nothing and looked at Phædrus and saw nothing and just sat there helpless, not knowing what to do. The vacuum was deadly. One girl suffered a nervous breakdown. You cannot withhold grades and sit there and create a goalless vacuum. You have to provide some goal for a class to work toward that will fill that vacuum. This he wasn't doing.

He couldn't. He could think of no possible way he could tell them what they should work toward without falling back into the trap of authoritarian, didactic teaching. But how can you put on the blackboard the mysterious internal goal of each creative person?

The next quarter he dropped the whole idea and went back to regular grading, discouraged, confused, feeling he was right but somehow it had come out all wrong. When spontaneity and individuality and really good original stuff occurred in a classroom it was in spite of the instruction, not because of it. This seemed to make sense. He was ready to resign. Teaching dull conformity to hateful students wasn't what he wanted to do.

He'd heard that Reed College in Oregon withheld grades until graduation, and during the summer vacation he went there but was told the faculty was divided on the value of withholding grades and that no one was tremendously happy about the system. During the rest of the summer his mood became depressed and lazy. He and his wife camped a lot in those mountains. She asked why he was so silent all the time but he couldn't say why. He was just stopped. Waiting. For that missing seed crystal of thought that would suddenly solidify everything.