

Saturday, February 23, 2008

To ride or not to ride?

This video retraces part of Robert Pirsig's route recounted in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, on the very R60 ridden by John Sutherland along with Pirsig. NOTE: As is sometimes more common on weekends than the rest of the week, today's blog entry is less law-related, which is the side of my life that helps enrich the law practice side of my life. I never finished reading *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (apparently reproduced here verbatim), and now cannot find where I last left my copy. What struck me most about this book by Robert Pirsig was the way he opened my eyes about his on-the-road experiences in the way -- but not as powerfully -- that Jack Kerouac did with *On the Road*. Right up to the time I became my own boss in 1998, I often viewed life and the world in much more bleak and gray terms than the much more positive turn I took after shedding myself of bosses, thus removing plenty of obstacles to feeling in much more positive and harmonious control of the rest of my life. Instead of sugar-coating life, Pirsig and Kerouac transcend tremendous chunks of its turmoil, but still do not escape all of it. Of course, Jack's life continued to be problematic enough that he died of alcoholism in 1969, which was an era of the best and worst of times; I was only six years old. Subsequent to Pirsig's inspiring *Zen and the Art* motorcycle journey with his son and friends, his son was shot dead by a robber. Why Pirsig in his afterword to *Zen and the Art* felt a need to make mention that the robbers were black is beyond me and continues disturbing me. Was the comment made from racial insensitivity, from trying to make a social commentary on race relations or for some other reason? As to bigotry, Ann Douglas in 1999 wrote that Kerouac "revert[ed] to the ugly anti-Semitic prejudices of his parents." Douglas continued that Kerouac "never interviewed the musician David Amram or the writer Joyce Johnson, both Jewish, who have stated that they experienced no hint of anti-Semitism in their relationships with Kerouac. Ginsberg saw Kerouac's anti-Semitism at first hand, yet until his own death in 1997, he held to his earliest, excited realization about Kerouac: 'If I actually confessed the secret tenderness of my soul, he would understand nakedly who I was.' Kerouac seldom judged; by all accounts, deliberate malice was foreign to him. In middle age, bitterly disappointed and drunk, he spewed prejudices the way some people use profanity." Reading *On the Road* -- here is a blog entry on one of my own experiences on the road, and here is another about how the best road taken is an internal journey -- can almost make the reader forget that while Kerouac was on the road, much of American pop culture was inundated with bland talk and mannerisms of Ike that were heavily mirrored on television and in television audiences and in the rest of American pop culture, which period covered the time of Communist witchhunts and a virulent time of the Cold War. Clearly, Kerouac was passing I Like Ike-type billboards while on his travels, while *On the Road* presented an alternative take on reality and, as I understand, tremendously influenced the counterculture hippie era that took the Sixties by storm. Reading *Zen and the Art* made me consider learning to ride a motorcycle, and to try out the path of secondary road riding pursued by Pirsig. I went to a Harley store after leaving the Fairfax County courthouse, picked up a pamphlet for a motorcycle driving school at a community college that had motorcycles provided by local vendors, and went into inertia until I bought a new bicycle six years ago, and liked how riding a bicycle provides the exercise that a motorcycle does not, and gives me many miles of paths for biking, walking and running that are off limits to motorized vehicles. If I take up motorcycle riding, it will be crossing over a line of physical risk-taking that I had previously drawn at whitewater rafting. which I have done both with and without a guide sitting in the same raft, and in which I once took a dive into the water at a particularly aggressive rapid. Then again, I do not know how much more dangerous motorcycling can be than the evening in 1985 that I walked from Greenwich Village at 2:00 a.m. back to my shoebox apartment near Gramercy Park, figuring that if a mugger came my way, I would just hail a taxi; when I snapped out of it, I realized that taxidrivers probably would avoid the risk. For now, motorcycling remains for me in the category of bungee jumping and parachuting; I have done none of them, except for riding on the back of a motorcycle for a few blocks at the age of seven, which was tremendously enjoyable. Those motorcycle riders with whom I have checked have told me of the skill needed to avoid wiping out not only from colliding with cars, but from negotiating around dangerous bumps that would be rather harmless to car drivers. Just this past week, a motorcycle-riding police officer escorting Hillary Clinton's campaign was killed after losing control of his bike; I would surmise he had plenty of riding experience, compared to my inexperience. At this point, the only reason I can think of for not learning to ride a motorcycle -- aside from setting aside the time to do so -- is to not cause the attendant risk to my family. I still have the desire, and if my two-year-old son gets the desire after he obtains his driver's license, that may open up a new opportunity. Jon Katz. ADDENDUM: Here is the description attached to the YouTube video shown above and uploaded by tfinlan: "A ride I took to the Black Hills retracing the route taken by Robert Pirsig and his son. The R60 was owned by John Sutherland who rode with Pirsig during the writing of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle maintenance*. Elderly gentleman showing photos to my friend is John. My friend continued on to California and I headed home to Toronto from the Hills. Just didn't have the time to keep going."

Posted by Jon Katz in Jon's news & views at 19:10

My brother, motorcycles are not as dangerous as you may think. Certainly they are more dangerous than cars. However, I have found that the joy far outweighs the risks.

If you get the itch, do take the safety course. And, never forget that everyone in a car is trying to kill you. Naturally, they are not, but if you ride with that attitude, you'll be safe.

I have loved returning to a two-wheeled existence. My motorcycle gets me through traffic faster, reduces my carbon footprint (45 mpg) and allows me to spend just that much more time smelling my surroundings on the way to work.

Well, if you decide to ride... definitely feel free to call on me for any advice.
Anonymous on Feb 25 2008, 17:30