

Based on excerpts from *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values* [R. Pirsig]

Part 1: Defining Quality

Excerpt 1: What is Quality?

Quality—you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it doesn't exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist. What else are the grades based on? Why else would people pay fortunes for some things and throw others in the trash pile? Obviously some things are better than others—but what's the "betterness"? -- So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding anyplace to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it?

...He told the class: "I think there is such a thing as Quality, but that as soon as you try to define it, something goes haywire. You can't do it." Murmurs of agreement. He continued, "Why this is, I don't know... A few days later he worked up a definition of his own and put it on the blackboard to be copied for posterity. The definition was: "Quality is a characteristic of thought and statement that is recognized by a nonthinking process. Because definitions are a product of rigid, formal thinking, quality cannot be defined." But then, below the definition on the blackboard, he wrote, "But even though Quality cannot be defined, you know what Quality is!" he said and he had some material ready to demonstrate it to them.

He had selected two examples of student composition. The first was a rambling, disconnected thing with interesting ideas that never built into anything. The second was a magnificent piece by a student who was mystified himself about why it had come out so well. He read both, then asked for a show of hands on who thought the first was best. Two hands went up. He asked how many liked the second better. Twenty-eight hands went up. "Whatever it is," he said, "that caused the overwhelming majority to raise their hands for the second one is what I mean by Quality. So you know what it is."

What he meant by Quality was obvious. They obviously knew what it was too, and so they lost interest in listening. Their question now was "All right, we know what Quality is. How do we get it?"...He singled out aspects of Quality in rhetoric such as unity, vividness, authority, economy, sensitivity, clarity, emphasis, flow, suspense, brilliance, precision, proportion, depth and so on... He showed how the aspect of Quality called unity, the hanging-togetherness of a story, could be improved with a technique called an outline. The authority of an argument could be jacked up with a technique called footnotes, which gives authoritative reference. Outlines and footnotes are standard things taught in all freshman composition classes, but now as devices for improving Quality they had a purpose. And if a student turned in a bunch of dumb references or a sloppy outline that showed he was just fulfilling an assignment by rote, he could be told that while his paper may have fulfilled the letter of the assignment it obviously didn't fulfill the goal of Quality, and was therefore worthless.

Now, in answer to that eternal student question, How do I do this? that had frustrated him to the point of resignation, he could reply, "It doesn't make a bit of difference how you do it! Just so it's good." The reluctant student might ask in class, "But how do we know what's good?" but almost before the question was out of his mouth he would realize the answer had already been supplied. Some other student would usually tell him, "You just see it."

...In a sense, he said, it's the student's choice of Quality that defines him. People differ about Quality, not because Quality is different, but because people are different in terms of experience.

Excerpt 2: Achieving Quality - Pay Attention, and put your heart into it

On an air-cooled engine like this, extreme overheating can cause a "seizure." This machine has had one—in fact, three of them. I check it from time to time the same way I would check a patient who has had a heart attack, even though it seems cured.

In a seizure, the pistons expand from too much heat, become too big for the walls of the cylinders, seize them, melt to them sometimes, and lock the engine and rear wheel and start the whole cycle into a skid. The first time this one seized, my head was pitched over the front wheel and my passenger was almost on top of me. At about thirty it freed up again and started to run but I pulled off the road and stopped to see what was wrong. All my passenger could think to say was "What did you do that for?"

I shrugged and was as puzzled as he was, and stood there with the cars whizzing by, just staring. The engine was so hot the air around it shimmered and we could feel the heat radiate. When I put a wet finger on it, it sizzled like a hot iron and we rode home, slowly, with a new sound, a slap that meant the pistons no longer fit and an overhaul was needed.

I took this machine into a shop because I thought it wasn't important enough to justify getting into myself, having to learn all the complicated details and maybe having to order parts and special tools and all that time-dragging stuff when I could get someone else to do it in less time. Big mistake. After three failed attempts and many months they told me, "Don't run it fast."

I found the cause of the seizures a few weeks later, waiting to happen again. It was a little twenty-five-cent pin in the internal oil delivery system that had been sheared and was preventing oil from reaching the head at high speeds.

The question why comes back again and again. Why did the mechanics butcher the job? ... They were like spectators. There was no identification with the job. No saying, "I am a mechanic." At 5 P.M. or whenever their eight hours were in, you knew they would cut it off and not have another thought about their work. They were already trying not to have any thoughts about their work on the job...

They were involved in it but not in such a way as to care. Not only did these mechanics not find that sheared pin, but it was clearly a mechanic who had sheared it in the first place, by assembling the side cover plate improperly. I remembered the previous owner had said a mechanic had told him the plate was hard to get on. That was why. The shop manual had warned about this, but like the others he was probably in too much of a hurry or he didn't care.

While at work I was thinking about this same lack of care in the digital computer manuals I was editing. Writing and editing technical manuals is what I do for a living the other eleven months of the year and I knew they were full of errors, ambiguities, omissions and information so completely screwed up you had to read them six times to make any sense out of them. But what struck me for the first time was the agreement of these manuals with the spectator attitude I had seen in the shop. These were spectator manuals. It was built into the format of them. Implicit in every line is the idea that "Here is the machine, isolated in time and in space from everything else in the universe. It has no relationship to you, you have no relationship to it, other than to turn certain switches, maintain voltage levels, check for error conditions—" and so on. That's it. The mechanics in their attitude toward the machine were really taking no different attitude from the manual's toward the machine, or from the attitude I had when I brought it in there. We were all spectators. And it occurred to me there is no manual that deals with the real business of motorcycle maintenance, the most important aspect of all. Caring about what you are doing is considered either unimportant or taken for granted... When you want to hurry something, that means you no longer care about it and want to get on to other things. I just want to get at it slowly, but carefully and thoroughly, with the same attitude I remember was present just before I found that sheared pin. It was that attitude that found it, nothing else.