

Maintenance as a Spiritual Practice?

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Blurb: If there is one universal truth that is obvious to all, it is that everything runs down, breaks down, wears out, or simply deteriorates. This truth applies to stars, humans, refrigerators, and everything else, and it can lead to frustration or even depression. We hold our own against the forces of chaos only by preventive maintenance and repair. Robert Pirsig, in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, explored this human reaction to the need for a rational approach to the problem of maintenance -- reconciling the romantic impulse (living “in the moment”) and the practical necessities of our lives. Perhaps understanding that maintenance is an integral part of life might enable greater clarity, mindfulness, acceptance, and peace of mind.

Introduction

If there is one universal truth that is obvious to all, it is that
Everything runs down, breaks down, wears out, or simply deteriorates.
This truth applies to stars, humans, refrigerators, and everything else.
It can lead to frustration or even depression.
We hold our own against the forces of chaos
Only by constant maintenance and repair.

The Curse of Life

Sometimes we see this as the curse of life --
Nothing lasts, nothing is permanent.
As soon as you fix one thing, another breaks down.
On the hottest day of the year, the air conditioner quits;
On the day you have an important appointment, the car quits;
The day you take your long-awaited guests out in the boat,
Something breaks down and you are stranded far from shore.
When you get back to the house you discover...
The refrigerator has finally died.

Sometimes it's two or three things at once that hit you!
And the perverse nature of things gives you a debilitating headache.

On those days when something has not broken down,
You spend your time working to hold back the forces
Of deterioration and destruction:
Prune back the trees that are threatening to engulf the house;
Fix the roof shingles burned off by the sun and loosened by the wind;
Repaint the peeling trim;
Change the oil in the engine;
Download software that fixes the "bugs" that crept into the last version.

Even things that seem permanent and solid deteriorate.
In the first century B.C. Lucretius' wrote in his poem, *The Nature of Things*:

*Year after circling year,
The ring upon a finger thins from inside out with wear.
The steady drip of water causes stone to hollow and yield.
The curving iron of the plough-share fritters in the field
By imperceptible degrees. The cobbles of the street
We see are polished smooth by now from throngs of passing feet.
And at the city gates, right hands of statues made of brass
Are worn away by touches of the greeting hands that pass.
And thus we see things dwindle by their being rubbed away --*

Not only does every single thing wear down and decay,
Nature itself is out to kill us.
Even our life-giving sun, source of all life,
Burns us and gives us fatal melanomas.

Whether by design or chance,
Every living thing lives by eating other living things.
We try to hold the critters that want to destroy us at bay
With fences, cages, immunization shots, and bug-spray.
But still they enter our bodies through the air we breathe,
The water we drink, the food we eat.
Tiny ticks jump from bushes and trees
To lay their eggs in us and make us sick.
Some creatures have unimaginably dastardly strategies --
From the pigs we eat, come invading tapeworms
That live in our guts.
These critters lay 250,000 eggs every day
That go out through our intestines;
They find their way to the food stream,
Then they find their ultimate homes in human brains --
Destroying their hosts by dementia. (cysticercosis)
Such sneaky perverse animals make lions, tigers, and sharks
Seem safe by comparison.

Does not this apparent conspiracy of the universe
To destroy its own children depress us?
Does it seem hopeless that everything that is built,
Breaks down in time?
Does it defeat us to know that we are born --
Just to live a while and die?

One saving philosophy, perhaps, is finding joy in this struggle.
E.M. Forster (1879-1970), the British novelist and essayist,
Wrote in 1919:

Failure or success seem to have been allotted to men by their stars. But they retain the power of wriggling, of fighting with their star or against it, and in the whole universe the only really interesting movement is this wriggle.

Romantic versus rational approaches to life

In 1974, Robert Pirsig published a philosophical novel:

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,

A book that became a runaway best-seller (5 million copies worldwide)

After being rejected by 121 publishers (a *Guinness* record).

Pirsig wrote about two kinds of people, two general traits,

Distinguished by their respective philosophical approaches to life

Pirsig roughly categorized these as the *romantic* and the *rational*.

Pirsig's novel involves a road trip involving two motorcycles:

Pirsig (who he calls The Narrator) and his son Chris on one bike,

And John and Sylvia Sutherland on the other.

[Display the puppets]

Here we see John and Sylvia -- older now but still without a worry.

Pirsig, The Narrator, is over here, older now also,

And accompanied by all his worrying imps.

John and Sylvia represent the "romantics."

John wants to go fast on his motorcycle trip

And to feel how good it is.

John and Sylvia live "in the moment."

John and Sylvia *believe* that all will go well under the stress of hard travel,

But they have no rational reason to believe that it will.

They just don't want to worry about trouble

Before it happens.

John and Sylvia are annoyed with Pirsig and his worrying imps.
Pirsig keeps checking things and making adjustments to his machine;
Pirsig insists on slowing down
To keep his machine from overheating in the desert.
John and Sylvia are positive and fun people.
We can imagine John and Sylvia “whistling in the dark.”
They represent the “Zen” side of the book’s title.

Pirsig represents the other side, the “Art of Motorcycle Maintenance” side.
Reason tells him to expect trouble and to prepare for it.
His *rationality* tells him that it is important to understand
All the inner workings of his machine.
His preoccupation with troublesome possibilities enables him
To prevent breakdowns or repair them if they occur.
Pirsig knows that if something *can* go wrong, it *will*.
Pirsig is not so much fun to be around on this trip --
Often warning John that he needs to slow down
And pay attention to the intricate workings of his motorcycle.

The “romantics” see Pirsig’s world as dehumanized --
Too concerned with technology; not having fun.
His world is repulsive to them.
It is even more annoying to them when he turns out to be right.

But Pirsig experiences his own form of happiness,
Or at least contentment in his approach to life.
His preventive maintenance
Reduces the likelihood of surprise breakdowns.
And his rational approach to how the machine works

Lets him know what to expect under all conditions.

Most of all,

He enjoys learning about and understanding the way the world works.

He seems to enjoy understanding the amazing technology of his motorcycle

And what it can do.

The precision interaction of pistons, valves, spark, and gears

Gives him pleasure --

And represents the rationality of science as opposed to the romance of hope.

Finding balance

Is there a spiritual message here?

Something that can enrich our lives?

Consider *Romance* versus *Reason*.

Finding the right balance may be the key to a life well lived.

Consider Pirsig here:

A rational understanding of how the world works

Means that we can expect and accept the inevitable effects

Of the universal laws of decay.

Sooner or later everything does break down.

Knowing that, eliminates frustrating surprises.

Meanwhile, taking care of it, -- things in our lives --

Knowing how everything works,

And knowing what can be expected of things

Can be a source of pleasure.

When we accept the universe's challenges as normal

We have no reason to be exasperated.

But look at carefree John and Sylvia:

A dose of the "romantic,"

Accepting some unpredictability in life,
Can keep us from boring ourselves to death.
The rational and the reasonable can be tiresome and dull to others.
A little spontaneity is the spice of life.

Getting back to Lucretius:

*Why doubt that reason alone can quench this terror with its spark
Especially since life is one long labor in the dark?
... we must scatter this terror of the mind, this gloom...
... by observing nature's laws and looking on her face."*