

Heavy Metal Thunder



How stupid is Ron? Why I think Ron is so stupid he would consider buying a motorcycle. Yes, I believe he is actually that stupid.

-h/t to Jim Gaffigan

A long time ago during my misspent youth, I used to ride motorcycles. I had four: A '69 Triumph Trophy 500 (old joke: Triumphs don't leak oil, they mark their territory). It was an absolutely beautiful bike with a deep purple sparkle tank that looked as if you could put your hand right into it. I say "was" because I sold it to my brother 46 years ago and it is now in pieces in his basement. I weep. I also had a '72 Triumph 750 Trident, a '71 Suzuki 185 dirt bike, and a '72 Suzuki water-cooled 750, the "Water Buffalo." I loved all of them.

At some point I realized that practically everyone I knew who owned a motorcycle had been involved in an accident of some kind, and my number had to be up. So, in 1975, I decided to try adulting for a change and I enrolled in college and sold all my bikes. I haven't been on a motorcycle since.

But here I am in my dotage, and I'm thinking about a motorcycle.

Now Nortons and Indians and Triumphs won't do; they don't have a soul like a Vincent '52.

*-Richard Thompson,
"952 Vincent Black Lightning"*

Walking to Starbucks the other day, I passed by a couple motorcycles parked on the corner. I still like to keep up with the world of motorcycle design; old habits die hard. It's my opinion that lately bikes have been looking more and more like high-tech insects. But I saw this Yamaha parked by the bus stop that really appealed to me. Not too flashy, it looked well-made, a little drab, and a little retro, kind of like me. It was a nice neutral color and the engine wasn't too big. The bikes I had the most fun with in my 20s were the smaller ones. The 500cc Triumph and the 185cc Suzuki were my favorites. This Yamaha was about 400cc. Perfect. I want it.

I've ridden motorcycles from the northern suburbs of Detroit down to Key West, Florida. I rode up into Canada to Toronto and down through Niagara Falls around Lake Erie in upstate New York and Pennsylvania and back to Detroit. And of course I rode all over Michigan and had a great time doing it; on a motorcycle, the travelling is the thing rather than merely getting someplace.

In a car you're always in a compartment, and because you're used to it you don't realize that through that car window everything you see is just more TV. You're a passive observer and it is all moving by you boringly in a frame. On a cycle the frame is gone. You're completely in contact with it all. You're in the scene, not

just watching it anymore, and the sense of presence is overwhelming.

*- Robert M. Pirsig,
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle
Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values*

You sense things on a bike that you miss in a car. On a bike you start noticing micro-climates. The temperature changes as you ride up and down hills, or as you ride past a body of water. You're exposed to the elements and will feel every nuance of weather, temperature, moisture, everything. Moving through a tree-lined section of road, you will feel that 2 degree drop. These kind of things make me happy. The smell of the land changes as you move from one place to another. The scent of a Michigan pine forest as you approach it or a Florida orange grove when the orange blossoms are out is unforgettable. I don't know why we notice smells more on a motorcycle, but it might be because our senses are already heightened to begin with. Or it might be because we're traveling pretty fast, so the smells change more frequently. Or it might be the fact that we have a large volume of air rushing by, so there are more molecules for our nose to pick up. For whatever reason, I've noticed that on a bike I smell everything: grass, trees, rivers, lakes, exhaust, flowers, pollution, everything. And I rarely notice these smells when I'm in a car, even with the windows open.



On a motorcycle you're extremely vulnerable, so you have to focus with a laser-like intensity on everything around you that could possibly affect you: potholes, squirrels, roadkill, puddles, irrational drivers, TM Next Gen. These things all matter. While riding, you learn to live in a semi-permanent state of hyper-awareness. Now this isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's all fueled by adrenaline, and adrenaline feels good. Motorcyclists notice everything big and small. They have to in order to avoid death. And they are constantly making lots of small decisions accordingly. "Is this jerk in front of me texting?" "Is that guy going to pull out of his parking spot?" "The pavement in this lane sucks, is it safe to switch?" "Is that car going to cross my path to exit?" "When is this truck moving over?" "Am I out of his blind spot yet?" You might feel like Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider*, but you learn quickly that cars & trucks aren't thinking about you at all. Not even a little. So you have to analyze other people and try to predict their behavior, bearing mind that they are all drunk. Or sociopaths. Or both. Which is to say you stop trusting people to act rationally – the one aspect of motorcycling I've retained over the last 45 years.

I don't want a pickle. I just want to ride my motor-sickle.

-Arlo Guthrie, "The Motorcycle Song"

Right about the time I sold all my bikes, I read the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: an Inquiry into Values* by Robert Pirsig. I don't know what I'd think

about the book today, but I loved it then for a lot of reasons, not the least of which was as best I could tell the motorcycle that the main character rode was a Triumph Trophy 500 – same as my beloved first bike.

But the book also articulated a difference I had noticed between me and some of my more artsy-fartsy musician friends. Like them, I love music, art, and literature: what we can call the "romantic" parts of life. But unlike some of them I also love technology, mechanical things, and how things work, things some of my friends found dull, awkward and ugly. These things can be seen as the more "classical" aspects of life since they were discussed by the ancient Greek philosophers. I think most of us understand that both the romantic and classical are equally important, but some people don't. I get shivers of joy from some bits of music, and I also love the thrill of crawling under my car and successfully fixing something. If I stare at something long enough I'll usually get that "ah-ha!" moment when I figure out how it works, why it stopped working, and then fix it. I think most of us do. I dove into rebuilding the 4 barrel carburetor of my 1968 Plymouth Fury, the blown engine of some ancient Subaru, and I spent months putting together a professional recording studio (and that 1965 technology worked really well and the studio made a decent profit, as well as some pretty cool records. Yes, records. I am old.).

Computers, carpentry, car repair - it's all the same. Some guy or gal built it, so you can probably figure it out. People seem to

think that I'm a techie and that I somehow know things (You know nothing, Jon Snow). Fact is, I'm a fraud. But more often than not, we can figure things out. But some of my more "romantic" friends won't even try. They seem to think that technology is somehow bad, ugly, or a lesser thing and they want no involvement with it at all. I've never understood that.

The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of the mountain, or in the petals of a flower. To think otherwise is to demean the Buddha - which is to demean oneself.

*- Robert M. Pirsig,
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle
Maintenance: An Inquiry Into Values*

The motorcycle combines both of these two views of what is important in life. Riding the motorcycle embodies the romantic view; maintaining the motorcycle, the classical. So, this should be perfect for someone like me, right?

What this all comes down to is "should I buy a motorcycle?" What are you, crazy? Of course not! They're just death machines! As long as I'm living in the traffic nightmare that is the Greater Washington DC area, a motorcycle is nothing more than a loaded gun; sooner or later, there's gonna be trouble. And, as I mentioned earlier, my number is up. But if I saw that Yamaha on Craigslist going for say \$2000...well, I really couldn't afford not to buy it, could I? **TM**