

Ghosts

From: "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance", Chapter 3,
by Robert M. Pirsig

After the rain stops, the sky lightens a little. But from the motel courtyard, I see past the cottonwoods that a second darkness, that of night, is about to come on. We walk into town, have supper, and by the time we get back, the fatigue of the day is really on me. We rest, almost motionless, in the metal arm-chairs of the motel courtyard, slowly working down a pint of whiskey that John brought with some mix from the motel cooler. It goes down slowly and agreeably. A cool night wind rattles the leaves of the cottonwoods along the road.

Chris wonders what we should do next. Nothing tires this kid. The newness and strangeness of the motel surroundings excite him and he wants us to sing songs as they did at camp.

"We're not very good at songs," John says.

"Let's tell stories then," Chris says. He thinks for a while. "Do you know any good ghost stories? All the kids in our cabin used to tell ghost stories at night."

"You tell us some," John says.

And he does. They are kind of fun to hear. Some of them I haven't heard since I was his age. I tell him so, and Chris wants to hear some of mine, but I can't remember any.

After a while he says, "Do you believe in ghosts?"

"No," I say.

"Why not?"

"Because they are *un-sci-en-ti-fic*."

The way I say this makes John smile. "They contain no matter," I continue, "and have no energy and therefore, according to the laws of science, do not exist except in people's minds."

The whiskey, the fatigue and the wind in the trees start mixing in my mind. "Of course," I add, "the laws of science contain no matter and have no energy either and therefore do not exist except in people's minds. It's best to

be completely scientific about the whole thing and refuse to believe in either ghosts or the laws of science. That way you're safe. That doesn't leave you very much to believe in, but that's scientific too."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Chris says.

"I'm being kind of facetious."

Chris gets frustrated when I talk like this, but I don't think it hurts him.

"One of the kids at YMCA camp says he believes in ghosts."

"He was just spoofing you."

"No, he wasn't. He said that when people haven't been buried right, their ghosts come back to haunt people. He really believes in that."

"He was just spoofing you," I repeat.

"What's his name?" Sylvia says.

"Tom White Bear."

John and I exchange looks, suddenly recognizing the same thing.

"Ohhh, *Indian!*" he says.

I laugh. "I guess I'm going to have to take that back a little," I say. "I was thinking of European ghosts."

"What's the difference?"

John roars with laughter. "He's got you," he says.

I think a little and say, "Well, Indians sometimes have a different way of looking at things, which I'm not saying is completely wrong. Science isn't part of the Indian tradition."

"Tom White Bear said his mother and dad told him not to believe all that stuff. But he said his grandmother whispered it was true anyway, so he believes it."

He looks at me pleadingly. He really *does* want to know things sometimes. Being facetious is not being a very good father. "Sure," I say, reversing myself, "I believe in ghosts too."

Now John and Sylvia look at me peculiarly. I see I'm not going to get out of this one easily and brace myself for a long explanation.

"It's completely natural," I say, "to think of Europeans who believed in ghosts or Indians who believed in ghosts as ignorant. The scientific point of view has wiped out every other view to a point where they all seem primitive, so that if a person today talks about ghosts or spirits he is considered ignorant or maybe nutty. It's just all but completely impossible to imagine a world where ghosts can actually exist."

John nods affirmatively and I continue.

"My own opinion is that the intellect of modern man isn't that superior. IQs aren't that much different. Those Indians and medieval men were just as intelligent as we are, but the context in which they thought was completely different. Within that *context* of thought, ghosts and spirits are quite as real as atoms, particles, photons and quants are to a modern man. In *that* sense I believe in ghosts. Modern man has his ghosts and spirits too, you know."

"What?"

"Oh, the laws of physics and of logic ... the number system ... the principle of algebraic substitution. These are ghosts. We just believe in them so thoroughly they seem real."

"They seem real to me," John says.

"I don't get it," says Chris.

So I go on. "For example, it seems completely natural to presume that gravitation and the law of gravitation existed before Isaac Newton. It would sound nutty to think that until the seventeenth century there was no gravity."

"Of course."

"So when did this law start? Has it always existed?"

John is frowning, wondering what I am getting at.

"What I'm driving at," I say, "is the notion that before the beginning of the earth, before the sun and the stars were formed, before the primal generation of anything, the law of gravity existed."

"Sure."

"Sitting there, having no mass of its own, no energy of its own, not in anyone's mind be-

cause there wasn't anyone, not in space because there was no space either, not anywhere - this law of gravity still existed?"

Now John seems not so sure.

"If that law of gravity existed," I say, "I honestly don't know what a thing has to do to be *nonexistent*. It seems to me that law of gravity has passed every test of nonexistence there is. You cannot think of a single attribute of nonexistence that that law of gravity didn't have. Or a single scientific attribute of existence it did have. And yet it is still 'common sense' to believe that it existed."

John says, "I guess I'd have to think about it."

"Well, I predict that if you think about it long enough you will find yourself going round and round and round and round until you finally reach only one possible, rational, intelligent conclusion. The law of gravity and gravity itself *did not exist* before Isaac Newton. No other conclusion makes sense.

"And *what that means*," I say before he can interrupt, "and *what that means* is that that law of gravity exists *nowhere* except in people's heads. It's a ghost! We are all of us very arrogant and conceited about running down other people's ghosts but just as ignorant and barbaric and superstitious about our own."

"Why does everybody believe in the law of gravity then?"

"Mass hypnosis. In a very orthodox form known as 'education.' "

"You mean the teacher is hypnotizing the kids into believing the law of gravity?"

"Sure."

"That's absurd."

"You've heard of the importance of eye contact in the classroom? Every educationist emphasizes it. No educationist explains it."

John shakes his head and pours me another drink. He puts his hand over his mouth and in a mock aside says to Sylvia, "You know, most of the time he seems like such a normal guy."

I counter, "That's the first normal thing I've said in weeks. The rest of the time I'm feigning twentieth-century lunacy just like you are. So as not to draw attention to myself."

"But I'll *repeat* it for you," I say. "We believe the disembodied words of Sir Isaac

Newton were sitting in the middle of nowhere billions of years before he was born and that magically he *discovered* these words. They were always there, even when they applied to nothing. Gradually the world came into being and then they applied to it. In fact, those words themselves were what formed the world. That, John, is ridiculous.

"The problem, the contradiction the scientists are stuck with, is that of *mind*. Mind has no matter or energy but they can't escape its predominance over everything they do. Logic exists in the mind. Numbers exist only in the mind. I don't get upset when scientists say that ghosts exist in the mind. It's that *only* that gets me. Science is *only* in your mind too, it's just that that doesn't make it bad. Or ghosts either."

They are just looking at me so I continue: "Laws of nature are human inventions, like ghosts. Laws of logic, of mathematics are also human inventions, like ghosts. The whole blessed thing is a human invention, including the idea that it isn't a human invention. The world has no existence whatsoever outside the

human imagination. It's all a ghost, and in antiquity was so recognized as a ghost, the whole blessed world we live in. It's run by ghosts. We see what we see because these ghosts show it to us, ghosts of Moses and Christ and the Buddha, and Plato, and Descartes, and Rousseau and Jefferson and Lincoln, on and on and on. Isaac Newton is a very good ghost. One of the best. Your common sense is nothing more than the voices of thousands and thousands of these ghosts from the past. Ghosts and more ghosts. Ghosts trying to find their place among the living."

John looks too much in thought to speak. But Sylvia is excited. "Where do you get all these ideas?" she asks.

I am about to answer them but then do not. I have a feeling of having already pushed it to the limit, maybe beyond, and it is time to drop it.

After a while John says, "It'll be good to see the mountains again."

"Yes, it will," I agree. "One last drink to that!"

We finish it and are off to our rooms.

Working guide:

Working alone by yourself:

1. *Write down what you think are the main postulates and counter-postulates in the text. Can you separate between parts meant ironically and parts meant seriously?*
2. *Write down your own personal view on the matter. If you don't feel you have any, then get support from the questions on the next page.*

Working in the group:

1. *Read aloud to each other your own written texts.*
2. *Produce a common text containing what the group judges are the best parts of the original texts you made. You do not need to agree in all the parts of the common text. To point out different opinions is just as good (or even better).*