

Excerpt from Wendy Pirsig's journal
Summary of Ashes Ceremony for Chris Pirsig
San Francisco Zen Center, Green Gulch Farm, December 23, 1979

I had stayed up late reading. So I was slow to wake up Sunday morning, even when I felt Bob crying and hugging me.

"What are you thinking about?" I said.

"Chris," he said. "It is a stormy day and it's going to be perfect weather for the ashes ceremony." As I listened I could hear wet tires on the San Francisco pavement on Page Street, and the wind was gusting and rattling the windowpanes.

We didn't have a ride to Green Gulch, but I'd learned the day before that a Zen Center bus left at 9:00, so a little ahead of time we left. Bob wore his navy trench coat over his usual baggy gray sweater and navy pants, and he carried Chris's black umbrella. I wore my only raincoat, a yellow rain slicker from the boat, over Chris's black mohair sweater, a long brown skirt, and white sneakers. Also Chris's electronic watch and the brown Buddhist beads he had once given me.

Almost a dozen of us eventually crowded into this van, and a cup was passed around for 50-cent fares. A good-faced student named Jim, the driver, asked us all to fasten our seat belts. The rain was slow and steady, and the windows steamed up.

The wide multi-lane highway carried us across the Golden Gate Bridge, through the rocky, treeless park. Across the bridge two tunnels go through the mountains, one in each direction. At the San Francisco end the tunnel arches have rainbows painted over them.

At Green Gulch it felt good to be in the barn again. Even though we had only been there when Katagiri Roshi lectured the morning before the funeral, it felt familiar and comfortable with the unfinished wood and sounds of rain. We pushed the sliding doors back and took off our shoes and raincoats, then passed through the high-ceilinged room where students have their quarters around a balcony upstairs, then went into the zendo, which also doubles as Buddha hall. That's why we liked it: less

folderol than at City Center. One room serves for everything. One big rough-looking Buddha with a candle and a kerosene lamp. Fewer people wore robes, just the priests. Other people could wear kasayas over their ordinary clothes. Half the people didn't even have that, they were just regular people sitting in chairs.

After Baker Roshi's lecture, Reb Anderson spoke to Bob and me about the ashes ceremony later today. "Roshi says the ceremony will be quite small, because of the rain," he said. We asked how far up the hill it will take place, and he said it would be about half a mile, above the outer parking lot.

"Near Alan Watts' marker?" Bob asked.

"Kind of."

"Is there any significance in the location," I asked, "or is it just a nice place?"

"It's just a nice place."

We could have attended Sunday lunch at Green Gulch, but instead Bob and I got on our shoes and rain stuff, and then under rainy skies went on a diversionary hike down to the ocean for the next three hours.

At the bottom of the gulch we reached a road that went past some houses, through a tall eucalyptus grove, then on toward the beach, where we began to feed upon the wind and the roaring noise and the cold blasts of air that numbed our ears. The rain made the eucalyptus smell very strong, and the wind made a sweeping sound in the leaves and branches. It was hardly raining and we couldn't use our umbrellas in the wind anyway, which seemed like a good 30 knots from the south and made our eyes wet when we reached the beach. The sands were cut in two by a surge of ocean water that flowed diagonally inland from the surf, and beyond the second part of the dunes, the surf was huge. There was a strange illusion that the ocean was actually a slope that rose up from the beach to the western horizon. Perhaps it was our perspective looking along the beach, or the relationship of the beach to the steep cliffs that spread up and down the coast from this valley, or perhaps it was the size of the seas themselves. After a while we turned out of the wind for relief, and looked back at the gray-green hills, and off to the cliffs on either side. To the north a couple lonely

palm trees waved wildly, and to the south the misted black cliffs looked formidable. It would have been a deadly coast today for a sailboat.

We went on to the Pelican Inn. Bob ordered a “ploughman’s lunch” and then was disappointed when it turned out to be just rolls and a couple pieces of cheddar. I shared my “shepherd’s pie” that was much better. We have been eating mostly vegetarian and Bob has been craving meat.

We headed back along up the two-lane highway. Horses grazed on the steep hillsides, and two gray deer scampered up the wet hill from the road. Cars with California plates whizzed by every few minutes. One was a hippie-mobile, a VW bus painted pink, with a roof made from the body of a VW bug. Below us roared the gray Pacific.

I was caught by thoughts of Chris, especially of his life here at Green Gulch when he first arrived in this magic valley. As we climbed, a hawk suspended at our elevation on the road hovered over the center of Zen Center’s farm hundreds of feet below. We too had a bird’s eye view of the random-looking truck gardens lying like green handkerchiefs below, with their neat compost heaps, chicken coops and special piles of eggshells. They were the only flat surface; beyond them, across the valley, hilltops seemed close enough to touch, even though it would actually take hours of walking to reach them. They were gray-green. This could have been named Gray-Green Gulch.

Finally a mile or so from the Zen Center buildings we crossed another stretch of eucalyptus lining the dirt hairpin drive in. I picked up some eucalyptus berries and noticed how they are covered with light blue powder that wipes off.

“Dynamic quality,” I said, making Bob laugh.

Back at the farm we started for the meeting place for the service. The ground all over Green Gulch was mud because of the rain, and we slogged to Baker’s house, where the entryway was crowded with huge bushes. The yard was entered through a beautiful bamboo gate six feet tall, and some kind of wind bell was getting a real workout in the storm.

We went in and found things very busy in the kitchen, all sorts of people milling

around. Someone showed us into the living room and brought us tea and cookies.

Gradually we became aware that in an adjacent "tatami room," ceremony preparations were underway. Katagiri Roshi appeared and went into the special room, with others following. Out of our view there was much scurrying about. Reb came and asked me for a calendar, but all I had was one for 1980. (It turned out the service would make a reference to the exact number of days since Chris's death.) A tall, reddish carved wood plank, perhaps cedar, was brought in and later removed, evidently after Katagiri painted on it. Baker Roshi came to the living room and shook hands with us. Then came word that "two members of the family" were waiting at the Wheelwright Center, and to our surprise, Judy and Geraldine Jobes were brought in. I had an extra set of photos from the funeral and gave it to them, and told them their letters had been posted on the City Center bulletin board.

At last everything was ready. The rain was back again. Ginny Baker told us the worst storm of the year was being forecast. She said it apologetically, but Bob's eyes twinkled when he heard it. Ginny recalled the ashes ceremony for Suzuki-Roshi, and said it started with a peaceful night and yet blew into such a gale that all the chants were thrown off, people held onto one another, and the ashes scattered instantly all over the hillside.

After a while we heard the densho bell, I think, and the priests and Baker and Katagiri all emerged from the tatami room, and then there was a general confusion of boots and shoes and umbrellas in the tiny entryway of the house. Reb came over to Bob and said in a quiet voice, "We'd like you to carry the ashes," just as he had spoken to Nancy at the funeral, and a look of pain crossed Bob's face just as it had hers. Reb put the white sling around Bob's neck with the knot in back, and he was given Baker's big black umbrella to carry in one hand while he steadied the bundle in the other. Reb then asked me to carry Chris's picture and to go and get it from Baker's office upstairs. I brought it down and set it on the kitchen table, and then had to figure out how to get my sneakers on in the entryway but not walk on the kitchen floor; I finally asked Geraldine to help me. At last I was outside in the rain opening Chris's umbrella, and

the procession began. We heard that sweet, sad, two-tone bell through the sound of rain on all the umbrellas. I couldn't tell if it was behind us or ahead.

The feeling was much different than the funeral. Chris was much more present here. We went single file on the gravel-and-mud-and-pothole driveway through the eucalyptus stand, the rain now pattering steadily. The top of my vision was framed by Chris's black umbrella, and just underneath it was the white knot clutching the back of Bob's neck like a child's hands. Bob later said he spent this whole part of the walk thinking of all the times he had carried Chris and glad that he could now carry him.

So all the way I just watched Bob's shoulders and back and legs, and the drips in the puddles, and my muddy sneakers, and the gray-green eucalyptus leaves and shreds of reddish bark. At the center of the procession my embarrassingly bright yellow raincoat contrasted with the dark black robes of monks plodding ahead and behind. Lying across my bright yellow arms, cradled in one hand while the other held the umbrella, was Chris's face, which I watched upside down and thought of how much pain Bob felt right then, and how much pain Chris would have felt to see those sad shoulders and the bent head. And so for quite a bit I cried again and it was another one of the 4,000 times in the last month that I felt I was marrying again.

The procession came out of the trees and through the parking lot and climbed up a grassy path for a while, and the rain and clouds dimmed the view of the steep hills up ahead as the ravine narrowed. Pretty soon I saw a clump of people ahead and realized more Zen Center people had gathered for the service and that we had been walking just in the procession of priests. A lot of the others had bright yellow raincoats too, and actually the effect of the random yellow splashes was rather nice among all the black of the priests' robes and all the earth tones of the valley and the gray of the sky. Also, Baker and several others carried large Chinese umbrellas that were bright orange. Katagiri's and Baker's robes were different from the black robes of the other priests; they were dusky brown and gray or blue. I forget which wore what.

Many of the American priests, including Baker, wore those crazy Japanese wood sandals. I was amused to notice that Katagiri wore stout black rubber boots. No fool!

The waiting people were lined up facing down the trail towards us, and as we reached them we all moved past with many entanglements of umbrellas. I was shown to one side of the group and Bob and Katagiri to the other, and the ashes were taken. Bob looked older than I had ever seen him, and very tired, and for the next ten minutes I seldom took my eyes from his face, though I often lost sight of him through the umbrellas. I actually wanted him to look at me at that point, in my yellow raincoat holding Chris's picture, and finally after a while he did, and brightened up a little, though not much.

Then Baker turned toward me for the picture. A *gisha* held his umbrella, and another also watched over Katagiri like a guardian angel. The whole area where we had gathered was covered with scattered straw, and at the head of it was a beautiful stone about two feet in diameter, sort of round and flat like a pushed in zafu or zazen cushion set on its side. I knew Bob would like it. On the ground in front of it were some pretty pink seashells and a feather. Before the stone stood a card table covered with a cloth, a candle, incense, water bowls and all sorts of other hocus pocus. One of the priests had to stand over it with an umbrella.

Baker intoned in Japanese and English, the gist of which seemed to be that we are here to pass out of mourning and clinging to death so that all that will remain is a clear, bright memory of Chris. Reb unwrapped the tall wood marker that Katagiri had painted and secured it in a hole behind the rock. I noticed that Bob didn't have an umbrella anymore and was getting all wet, but then someone came and "*gishaed*" with his umbrella. Finally Bob wound up next to the stone, with Reb under his *gisha's* umbrella, and Baker and his *gisha* on the other side, Katagiri and his *gisha* just down the slope from Bob and Reb, and I stood opposite them. I felt throughout the whole thing that the priests around me were being very protective. Katagiri was wearing his fierce, stony frown, like an immovable stone roshi. His eyes stayed on the rock, or sometimes on the trees or the ground. Reb too had high importance in the ceremony, and his face had that same look of emotion we had seen earlier, pain and stress. I was glad he and Bob stood close together.

At once point through the umbrellas I could see that the container Bob had carried was now unwrapped, and what looked like a small pile of crushed bones sat in a dish on top of this jar. Katagiri then went forward and did something I couldn't see. Then Baker Roshi handed Bob some chopsticks. The idea, it turned out, was to take a piece in the chopsticks, pass it over the incense burner ("if you want," said Baker), and place it a hole dug under the rock. I didn't know how Bob would manage this with his shaking hands, or me either, once Baker turned and asked me to do it too. But Bob took his turn. Then he turned and handed the chopsticks to Reb, which was not in the script. Reb gave him a startled look and handed the sticks to Baker.

I took my turn and the piece didn't land in the deep part of the hole, so Baker Roshi moved it. I think at this point Geraldine and Judy were invited to follow, and Reb also took part. At once point I saw Bob and Reb exchange warm glances. The rest of the ashes were all poured into a paper funnel which fed them neatly into the hole.

And then it began to rain harder than ever. Baker Roshi continued intoning, but we could hardly hear what he said for all the racket on our umbrellas. There was something to do with water; we were all invited to ladle three ladles full of water over the rock. This took a while, and during the process some gusts of wind started to catch a few umbrellas and knock them into each other. I looked at the hills, and whole sheets of rain were being blown up the valley now, and there were howling and whooshing sounds. Baker continued his ceremony in English and Japanese. I think there were some bananas and apples being offered in some context, but these niceties were starting to get really lost in the wind and rain and bobbing umbrellas.

Then, all of a sudden, a huge blast of air roared up the valley and tried to bend all the umbrellas inside out. Bob and I looked at each other. He was beginning to look gleeful, and I started to feel euphoric. We all began chanting a short Japanese chant that I have now learned from the morning services. It is repeated over and over, and as we chanted the weather chanted too, drowning our voices all out. Chris's umbrella got caught on someone's poncho and one prong sprang, so they spent the chant trying to fix it while I watched, and it all felt very friendly. The chant ended in an absolute fury of

wind and rain.

Baker Roshi's ceremony was over. Reading from notes, he said that we had offered "something from the air and sea, we have offered food and water," etc. He recited how many days since Chris had died, and said, "This is your new home." He asked Bob and then me if we had something to say, and we said no. And then, as the valley roared and the sky grew dark with approaching night, everyone started milling around and going down the hill. Someone offered me their umbrella, since Chris's was now broken, but I was fine and just pulled up my yellow hood. Then I went to Bob, who now looked radiant and strong again. He was so pleased with the weather.

So we then all tumbled and slid down the hill. Baker and Katagiri disappeared. Students helped carry down all the gear like the card table. Dan Welch bounded along with some folding chairs, and Bob shouted to him about how this day was meant for Chris, and Dan smiled. Dan recalled the big storm that happened at the Suzuki-Roshi ashes ceremony. Dan didn't shout, though. Everyone was quiet except Bob and the storm.

Right ahead was Reb, sliding along in his Japanese sandals. He tucked the skirts of his robe up to stay clean, and he was trying also to hold both an umbrella and a brass incense burner while keeping his balance. He looked back and when he saw me he said, "Would you carry this please?" and handed me the incense burner. Bob was now carrying Chris's photograph. As we reached flat ground he and Reb walked side by side for a while, then Bob stepped ahead and Reb dropped back. At one point Reb's robe snagged a big branch that had fallen in the road, and I unhooked it. Eucalyptus branches, bark and leaves were everywhere. When we got to the dining room I held the incense burner until Reb came and took it.

In the dining room, the 20 or 30 of us who gathered shared that hubbub of excitement that stormy weather sometimes brings. Bob was grinning at everybody. Issan Tommy Dorsey came and said some things and then put his hand on Bob's shoulders, which brought tears to his eyes. Tommy's face was all red and Irish and moonlike, and he too recalled the storm during the Suzuki-Roshi ashes ceremony.

Katagiri Roshi came in, unaware of Bob's mood and looking doubtful. Bob looked at him and called over, "Good storm!" and Katagiri's whole face burst into a smile.

Soon Baker Roshi arrived and sort of called the meeting to order, saying that we would reassemble in the Wheelwright Center living room for tea, and to finish the incense offering that was interrupted. Apparently at the end they had been trying to light incense and it wouldn't go.

Then he said, "I think Chris would have liked this weather," and looked at Bob.

"He would have *loved* it," Bob roared, punching a fist through the air and grinning. Everybody laughed. "He was born in a storm, and his whole life was stormy too. He would have called this perfect weather."

We reassembled upstairs. Geraldine and Judy left. Katagiri was greeting people, saying, "Good storm! Good storm!"