



### **Illich's Table**

Daniel Grego

“Is it not the case that our world is out of whack with any prior historical epoch?”  
—Ivan Illich<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.

In 1985, Wendell Berry wrote an essay entitled “What are People For?” He recounted the mass migration in the twentieth century of U.S. farmers into cities and the consequent problems. There were growing numbers of underemployed or perhaps even “permanently unemployable” city dwellers while rural areas declined as a result of necessary work being left undone. “What are people for?” Berry wondered. He went on to ask, “Is the obsolescence of human beings now our social goal?”<sup>2</sup>

Early on, as a boy growing up in Chicago, I sensed people were gradually reducing themselves to cogs in some giant economic machine, what Dwight Eisenhower had called “the military/industrial complex.” Everything around me seemed prepackaged: food, entertainment, ideas, even fears. The war in Vietnam raged on all through my adolescence. I could not understand how so many of my neighbors had come to believe that peasants living on the opposite side of the world, whose most “advanced” technology was the bicycle, were a threat to us on the southwestern shores of Lake Michigan.

Great abstractions were paraded before us: freedom, democracy, affluence, progress. My friends and I were being conditioned for our roles as soldiers and, if we should survive our years of “service,” as consumers. Increasingly, the evidence pointed to the fact that “affluent” consumption was polluting the water and air and damaging the land—the real places upon which

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<sup>1</sup> Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *What are People For?* (Berkeley, California: North Point Press, 1990), 123-125.

our lives depend. This all seemed completely “out of whack” to me.<sup>3</sup> Like Berry, I wondered if this was all people were for.

When I encountered the writings of Ivan Illich in the early 1990s, I felt an immediate connection with the author. Here was a guy who shared my sense of dis-ease and who was trying to understand how this epoch had come into being. As I studied Illich’s work, I came to believe that he, more than anyone else I knew about, had exposed how “out of whack” the dominant Western ways of living had become, both for our home places and for our souls.

His series of “pamphlets,” as he called them, published in the 1970s drew attention to the “counter-productivity” of modern institutions.<sup>4</sup> Later, he examined critically the assumptions of modern “economics,” which had strayed a long way from the “management of households” as the etymology of the word implies.<sup>5</sup> As a historian, he sought to reveal the origins of these institutions and the unexamined assumptions he called “modern certainties.”

All along, he tried to practice the vocation of friendship symbolized by the “hospitable table” he offered his interlocutors wherever he lived. He hosted symposia where common investigation was accompanied by food and some of the “ordinary but decent wine” a good lawyer had persuaded the IRS was Illich’s major teaching tool and therefore tax deductible.<sup>6</sup> He became a master of the art of conviviality.

In this meditation, I invite you to join me in imagining what it would have been like to sit at Illich’s table, to share food and wine with him, and to participate in the conversations his search for truth inspired.

## 2.

Near the end of his life, Ivan Illich “stammered” to his friend, David Cayley, a response to modern Western society he had “avoided to do for thirty years.” Looking around, Illich observed “horror, cruelty, and degradation with no precedent in other historical epochs.” Illich saw “an extraordinary evil,” an evil new and mysterious he could only name with the Latin phrase, *mysterium iniquitatis*.<sup>7</sup> What was he talking about? And what solace or remedy, if any, did he offer?

In the Western traditions, philosophers and theologians have described two types of evil: “natural evil” that results from disease, famine, drought, volcanic eruption and the like and “moral evil” that results from deliberate human action.<sup>8</sup> Illich saw the new evil he was trying to

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<sup>3</sup> According to the *Oxford Universal Dictionary*, the phrase “out of whack” means “not in proper condition” or “disordered.”

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); *Tools for Conviviality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); *Energy and Equity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974); and *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Ivan Illich, *Shadow Work* (London, Marion Boyars, 1981); and *Gender* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), 146.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 60-61.

<sup>8</sup> A detailed examination of the problem of evil is beyond the scope of this essay. Susan Neiman has proposed the history of contemporary European philosophy can best be understood as attempts by modern thinkers to come to grips with the problem of evil from the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon to Auschwitz. See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002).

contemplate as the corruption of the glorious good that entered the world with the Incarnation. When the early Christian church succumbed to the temptations of worldly power and wealth, it began a turning away from the liberation promised in the Gospels. Human institutions began to supplant the personal calling of love. This corruption contributed to the evolution of a new kind of mentality that over time replaced felt connection with nature and other persons with “misplaced concreteness” and an idolatry of technique.

By considering the December 26, 2004 earthquake and subsequent tsunami in the Indian Ocean, I hope to clarify all three types of evil. At first glance, the recent tsunami is obviously an example of natural evil. The 200,000 human deaths and immense physical damage the tsunami left in its wake were the results of a “natural” disaster. No deliberate human action could be blamed. Looking more closely, however, it becomes clear the extent of the devastation was greatly exacerbated by human greed, a moral evil. The coral reefs and coastal forests that once provided natural protections against such tidal waves had been decimated by economic development.

The ugly side of this greed is suggested by a comment made on National Public Radio by Fred Bergstenof, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of the Treasury and current head of the Institute for International Economics. “Like any disaster,” Bergstenof stated, “you get negative effects through destroying existing properties and people’s health [sic], but you do get a burst of new economic activity to replace them, and, on balance, that generally turns out to be quite positive. When they put up new resort hotels, they’ll be more modern, they’ll be more attractive. They’ll probably bring in more people in the future.”<sup>9</sup>

Greed is nothing new, however. And even Bergstenof’s cold cost/benefit calculus is not novel. But, some of the stories about the events of December 26, 2004, reveal aspects of the *mysterium iniquitatis*.

Early on, reports surfaced of people whose lives were saved by animals. Rupert Sheldrake, writing in *The Ecologist*, recounted some of these events:

Elephants in Sri Lanka and Sumatra moved to high ground before the giant waves struck; they did the same in Thailand, trumpeting before they did so. According to a villager in Bang Koey, Thailand, a herd of buffalo was grazing by the beach when the animals “suddenly lifted their heads and looked out to sea, ears standing upright”; they turned and stampeded up the hill, followed by villagers, whose lives were thereby saved. At Ao Sane beach, near Phuket, dogs ran up to the hill tops, and at Galle in Sri Lanka dog owners were puzzled by the fact that their animals refused to go for their usual morning walk on the beach. In Cuddalore District in Tamil Nadu, southern India, buffaloes, goats and dogs escaped, as did a nesting colony of flamingos that flew to higher ground. In the Andaman Islands “stone age” tribal groups moved away from the coast before the disaster, having been alerted by the behavior of animals.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Max Keiser, “The Month,” *The Ecologist* 35, no. 1 (2005): 14.

<sup>10</sup> Rupert Sheldrake, “Listen to the Animals,” *The Ecologist*, 35, no. 2 (2005): 18.

Vandana Shiva reflected: “Animals and indigenous communities had the intelligence to anticipate the tsunami and protect themselves. The IT-embedded 21<sup>st</sup> century cultures lacked the natural intelligence to connect to the earthquake and tsunami in time to protect themselves.”<sup>11</sup>

A common theme in Illich’s writings is his observation that modern Western ways of living are deadening our imaginations. Human institutions and the abstractions upon which they are built undermine people’s trust in their own senses and in the “common sense” that would allow them to understand how things fit together. The loss of common sense, or in Shiva’s words, “natural intelligence,” leaves us as spectators to our own experience. Some Westerners on vacation on the beaches of the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004 took photographs of the wall of water rushing toward them just before they drowned. Were they resigned to their fate, or were they watching a movie?

The modern “global economy” is washing out, for more and more people, the possibility of living their own lives. What once were described as “natural” human activities are rapidly being replaced by the consumption of commodities and services. Instead of learning or healing or moving, we are persuaded “to get an education,” that we have “a right to healthcare,” and our status in society can be established by the make of car we drive. Is it any wonder so many people feel lost and dissatisfied when they have been seduced into surrendering their lives to systems and experts and to the Gross National Product?

When Illich discussed the new, mysterious evil besetting us, he noted the growing disparity in the incomes between the rich and the poor all over the world. But, he added:

What worries me most about that is...the fact that [the poor] can no longer live, as they could thirty years ago, without recourse to money. Then many things were still not monetarized; subsistence still was functioning. Today they can’t move without buying a bus ticket. They can’t get heat in their kitchen by collecting wood but have to buy electricity.<sup>12</sup>

Nowhere is the loss of common sense and human agency more apparent than in the deterioration of human communities. Even the word “community” has been eviscerated in modern usage. It has become a “plastic word” devoid of explicit meaning.<sup>13</sup> A human community is a group of people who live together in a specific place, who know each other, and care for each other. Communities must be limited in size or the whole concept will burst like a balloon pumped too full of air.<sup>14</sup> For their health and vitality, communities depend upon the virtue of their members and virtue is predicated on human action. (What are people for?) We must actively engage in the arts of living, suffering, and dying.

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<sup>11</sup> Vandana Shiva, “The Lessons of the Tsunami,” *The Ecologist*, 35, no. 2 (2005): 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), 60-61.

<sup>13</sup> Uwe Poerksen, *Plastic Words* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

<sup>14</sup> To protect themselves from parochialism and stagnation, communities must also make room for what Wendell Berry calls “waywardness,” what many traditional cultures associate with a “trickster” character, in North America often taking the form of a coyote. Illich had a bit of the trickster in him. See Wendell Berry, “The Wild Birds” in *That Distant Land* (Washington, D.C.: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2004). Also, Paul Radin, *The Trickster* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972).

Illich's friend, John McKnight, observed: "Communities grow weak as systems grow strong."<sup>15</sup> The systems that make up the modern "global economy" are like vampires sucking the lifeblood out of human communities, which grow pale and wizened, filled with the living dead: people cut off from each other and from nature, distracted by the spectacle of modern mass media, and whose every vice is magnified and manipulated to keep them plugged into the economic machine.

But, it is even worse. Again, as John McKnight has pointed out, many of the systems of the modern world hide behind "the mask of love."<sup>16</sup> The "caring professions"—our doctors and teachers and undertakers—steal care, the manifestation of love, from communities leaving them adrift in a sea of ministrations, each of which promises salvation it cannot possibly deliver.

Both the theft of common sense and the theft of human agency are justified in the name of "progress." Progress, whether promoted by Alan Greenspan, the American Medical Association, or the NEA, rests on the idea that human beings can understand, plan, and control creation. We are no longer God's, but think of ourselves as gods.

Illich told the story of asking his friend, Jacques Maritain, why the concept of "planning" did not appear in his philosophy. Puzzled, Maritain asked if "planning" was the English word for accounting. Illich answered, "No." "Engineering?" "No." Finally, Maritain understood. "Planning," he said, "is a new variety of the sin of pride."<sup>17</sup> I believe this new variety of pride is the key to understanding the mysterious species of evil about which Illich stammered.

In an early essay, "Rebirth of Epimethean Man," Illich opposed the *hubris* of Prometheus raising expectations in the modern world to the "hindsight" of his brother, Epimetheus, whose life was centered on hope. We are not gods. While we can admire Prometheus' daring, emulating his *hubris* has led to a world in which "everywhere nature becomes poisonous, society inhumane, and the inner life is invaded and personal vocation smothered."<sup>18</sup>

Epimetheus' chief virtue is *sophrosyne*, which under the name of temperance was considered one of the four cardinal virtues of antiquity. The word literally means "of sound mind" and connotes humility and restraint. It provides the foundation for a philosophy of limits. Throughout his long public career, Ivan Illich called us again and again to rediscover this virtue.

We cannot avoid "natural evil." ("If you want to make God laugh, tell Him what your plans are" is an old Yiddish proverb.) The best we can do is comfort each other when we experience such suffering. "Moral evil" is opposed by community standards and by cultivating virtuous habits. To resist the *mysterium iniquitatis*, we must regain the practice of *sophrosyne* and sustain the courage to hope.

At one point in his conversations with Illich, Cayley, burdened with the darkness meditating on the new type of evil can cause, asked Ivan: "Is your counsel really to live in the dark?" "No," Illich responded emphatically. "Carry a candle in the dark, *be* a candle in the dark." Illich went on to relate the story of his friend and teacher, Dom Helder Camara. Confronted with the evil of the military government in Brazil, which murdered so many in its pursuit of power and its definition of "progress," Camara refused to abandon hope. "You must *never* give up," he

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in David Cayley, "Part Moon, Part Traveling Salesman: Conversations with Ivan Illich," *Ideas*, CBC Radio, 1989.

<sup>16</sup> See John McKnight's essay in Ivan Illich et al, *Disabling Professions* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1992), 61-62.

<sup>18</sup> Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 113.

advised Illich. “As long as a person is alive, somewhere beneath the ashes there is little bit of remaining fire.”

“Our task,” Camara explained, cupping his hands around his lips, “is to blow...carefully, very carefully, blow...you’ll see if it lights up. You mustn’t worry whether it takes fire again or not. All you have to do is blow.”<sup>19</sup>

### 3.

As dusk fell on Saturday, February 12, 2005, eighteen men and women piled into a wagon pulled by two draft horses for a final ride into the woods at Harnischfeger Park in southeastern Dodge County, Wisconsin. In the distance, wisps of mist hovered over the ground around the black trunks and branches of the leafless trees. The passengers, huddled together against the chill, teased each other, laughed, and enjoyed each other’s company. They had just finished cleaning up after WinterFest, a day-long celebration at the park that had featured winter games, cross country skiing, pony rides, a dog sled demonstration, a treasure hunt, a petting zoo, a bon fire, food and drink.

The proceeds from WinterFest were to be used to improve the playground and playfield facilities at the newest Dodge County Park. Harnischfeger Park, located on 132 acres along the Rock River in the Town of Lebanon, had belonged to the employees of the Harnischfeger Corporation since 1969. The private park had been the site for picnics, wedding receptions, and rural retreats for the company’s urban workers. In the first years of the new millennium, the employees concluded they could no longer afford to maintain the park and decided to put it up for sale.

Immediately, developers descended like vultures hoping to make a killing by converting the park into a housing subdivision. The park’s neighbors objected. As in other areas of the United States, southeastern Wisconsin had already lost too much “green space” to “development.” Perhaps out of nostalgia, the Harnischfeger folks listened to the loose-knit, ad hoc coalition of farmers, artists, and assorted green space lovers and agreed to sell the property to Dodge County for considerably less than the developers were offering on the condition it would remain a park.

Even at the reduced price, the County Board balked. Times were tough. Budgets were tight. Many County employees had been recently laid off. The park coalition people were not to be deterred, however. Neighbors talked to neighbors, called local businesses, broke into piggy banks. In a matter of weeks, they raised \$150,000 toward the purchase price. Mounting political pressure finally persuaded the Board to make the deal and Harnischfeger Park became the fifth publicly owned park in Dodge County.

WinterFest was one of the annual fund-raisers the park coalition committed to organize to defray the cost of maintaining the park. All the food and entertainment were donated. The members of the group volunteered their time to sell concessions, to staff the event, to set up beforehand, and to clean up afterward.

The story of saving Harnischfeger Park is an example of people participating in what Ivan Illich might have called “the rests of community,” similar to “the rests of gender” he

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<sup>19</sup> David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1992), 147-148.

described in his book, *Gender*, and about which David Schwartz has written so beautifully.<sup>20</sup> Illich believed these “rests” were remnants of something lost and gone forever like the fossilized bones of an extinct animal. But I have not been able to see them that way. When I first read the phrase “the rests of gender,” I thought of musical rests, some moments of silence amid the noise of the modern world. I thought of blades of grass cracking the concrete of modern roads. I thought of a poem I had written some twenty-five years ago called “The Fields”:

the fields i walked  
over as a boy  
hoping to be surprised  
by a pheasant's  
sudden flurry of wings  
startled into the air  
by my approaching  
are now buried  
beneath glaciers  
of suburban cement. the mole  
who once found light  
at the feet of corn  
now bumps his head  
against the stone.  
the ghosts of grasshoppers  
leap in the weeds  
behind the stores  
where the tongues  
of the ghosts of frogs  
snap them out of the air.  
where have all the barns gone?  
i remember one  
that stood by an apple orchard.  
we used to play war there  
lobbing rotten-apple-grenades  
into the loft. we died  
a thousand deaths  
in an afternoon. looking across  
the shopping malls now,  
it's hard to imagine  
the fields not dead.  
but they're only hibernating.  
they lie as in a child's game of war.  
they'll get up again.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ivan Illich, *Gender* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); and David Schwartz, *Who Cares?: Rediscovering Community* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997); David Schwartz, “Ivan Illich's Concept of ‘Rests’: Glimpses of a World Past,” in *The Challenges of Ivan Illich*, eds. Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> From Daniel Grego, *One Winter Night: Collected Poems 1966-1996* (1997) 183. Independent Manuscript.

Perhaps, my view is too romantic. As part of creation, the grass and fields will “get up again.” Gender and community are cultural constructs. They can be lost forever. But all over the world, people are attempting to recover a contemporary art of living. They are longing for community, to reconnect with their neighbors and with their home places.<sup>22</sup> The eighteen women and men enjoying the wagon ride in the brisk February air found common ground in their shared interest in Harnischfeger Park. They acted together as citizens and, as a result, friendships were made or strengthened and a small green place on earth was preserved. These efforts are perhaps too little, too late. But, one never knows. The task of those who dream about saner ways of living is to discern the spark smoldering in those they encounter, to cup their hands around their lips, and carefully, very carefully, to blow.

4.

When I woke this morning, a light snow was falling. Through the window, I could see a marsh hawk perched on a branch of the silver maple in the yard. He sat there for a while, tilting his head every few minutes to survey the surroundings. Finally, he took off in the direction of the river.

Ivan Illich hovered over the certainties of the modern world like a hawk and for half a century he swooped down to puncture them with his beak and talons. As sharp as his criticism remained, after his early books, he offered no prescription. His friend, Bob Duggan, tells the story of a young woman asking Illich after one of his lectures, “What are we to do?” Illich responded with a sarcastic grin, “Don’t tempt me!”<sup>23</sup>

Gustavo Esteva says peasants in Mexico appreciated Illich because he did not give them a recipe.<sup>24</sup> It would make no sense to have devoted fifty years to criticizing trends that diminish people’s capacity to live their own lives and then to tell them what to do. But, while he did not provide a recipe, Illich generously allowed us to look into his pantry where we might find some ingredients to use to make our own stews.

The titles of some of his books and the concepts he was explicating at the end of his life suggest what he thought might be nourishing:

Celebration—Illich believed every moment of existence depends upon the will of God. Every moment, therefore, is a gift to us to be treasured and for which to be grateful.

Awareness—To live fully means to be open to surprise, to use our senses to savor the tastes, smells, sounds, sights, and textures given to us in each moment.

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<sup>22</sup> I have in mind the base communities in Latin America, the Chipko movement in India, the Mondragon Cooperative in Spain, the Seikatsu Clubs in Japan, the Old Order Amish in the United States, among others. I have written about this more extensively in *The Tiniest Chill: Explorations of the Confluence of Educational and Environmental Philosophy*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, The Union Institute & University, 1997.

<sup>23</sup> Personal conversation.

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in David Cayley, “Part Moon, Part Traveling Salesman: Conversations with Ivan Illich,” *Ideas*, CBC Radio, 1989.



Hospitality—We should set a place at our table for the stranger who knocks at the door, “for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”

Friendship—Once the highest flowering of civic virtue, friendship, one of the three classical forms of love, must now be the soil out of which saner ways of living can grow.

Conviviality, *conspiratio*, *communio*—We find ourselves in the eyes of our friends. The arts of living, suffering, and dying are best practiced in community. We can celebrate who we are and where we are by sharing breath, food, and wine.

*Askesis*, limits, equity—Illich once defined *askesis* as “courageous, disciplined, self-critical renunciation accomplished in community.”<sup>25</sup> Renunciation does not preclude enjoyment, but enhances it by reducing distractions. But, renunciation and self-limitation are also preconditions for justice. As Mahatma Gandhi told us: “The world has enough for everyone’s need, but not for everyone’s greed.”<sup>26</sup>

Proportionality—We must recover the common sense of what is fitting, of how creation fits together, in order to orient ourselves toward the good, the true, and the beautiful.

These are some of the staples and spices one could find at Illich’s table. How we combine them will be up to each of us working in our communities with our neighbors and friends. Bon appetit!

### Author’s Bio

Daniel Grego is Executive Director of TransCenter for Youth, Inc., a nonprofit agency that operates four high schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Dr. Grego has been a guest speaker for many organizations like the Centre for British Teachers and the Children’s Defense Fund, and at numerous forums focusing on education issues. He has taught in the Education Department at Alverno College and the Philosophy Department at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee and been a consultant for the Institute for the Transformation of Learning, the Helen Bader Foundation and to Wisconsin’s Governor and Legislature in the drafting and revision of Wisconsin’s Children At Risk statute. He is a founding member of the Alliance for Choices in Education (ACE) in Milwaukee. His writings have appeared in *Encounter*, the *CYD Journal*, *Out of the Box*, the *Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel*, *America*, the *George Wright Forum*, *Life Learning Magazine*, *Education Revolution*, *Vitae Scholasticae* and other periodicals and anthologies, including the book *Life Learning: Lessons from the Educational Frontier*. One of his main interests is exploring the confluence of the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, Ivan Illich and Wendell

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<sup>25</sup> Ivan Illich, “Brave New Biocracy: Health Care from Womb to Tomb,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1994): 10.

<sup>26</sup> Arun Gandhi, *World Without Violence* (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern Limited, 1994), 16.

Berry. He lives with his wife, choreographer Debra Loewen, and their daughter, Caitlin Grego, on a small farm in the Rock River watershed in Dodge County, Wisconsin.