

**Myth Maker, Story Weaver Ivan Illich:
On the Rebirth of Epimetheus**

Madhu Suri Prakash

1st Story—Shattered Certainties: Services, Systems and Self-Management

In addition to being the most important social critic of the 20th century, Ivan Illich also happened to be the most terrifying teacher of my life: systematically shattering all my certainties of Systems, Services and Self-Management. Diligently, I learned these in the laps / labs [?] of Faithful Professionals.

No myth, my first tale of meeting Illich is straight brute fact. Daunted I found myself from that first encounter with Illich overwhelmed by the sharpness of an unmatched intellect that could easily pierce right through the opacity of history which shrouded for most of us “the Dark Ages” of his favored 12th century; even as it shed brilliant light, ripping right through the opacity shrouding the 20th century under the heavy dark blanket of modern industrial certainties; writ with all the arrogance of modern grandiosity.

Crippling contemporary certainties, Illich’s brilliance illuminated, transmogrify real women and men into destructive, needy *consumers*: one of two inevitable kinds of slaves—the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy. Slavery and imprisonment from cradle to grave, rooted as deep and early as parental and professional anxiety driven kindergartener’s grade zeal or grade envy, whipped into performance speed; racing for the final dash—high scores on SATs, GREs, and LSATs, promising power, prestige and all else that defines the American Dream. Pushing, pummeling, seducing or bribing our children; faithfully repeating to ourselves and the rest of the world the indubitable beauty of this dream, we connect it to the other modern truth: Education is a universal human good; so good as to be a universal Human Right.

Worse, yet, than being daunted by the sheer forceful brilliance of Illich’s genius was the sense of being summarily dismissed by him for being a sincere, dedicated, “alternative” educator who would do right by her students—secularly saving them from grade envy or credential addiction; who would design an “empowering” curriculum or a “radical” pedagogy a la Freireans; who would create the best “liberation,” “authenticity” and “happiness” promoting classrooms; working with a Dream Team of “alternative educators” for reforming, revamping and radicalizing education; ready to study sitting at the feet of the Master of the ‘60s seminal critique of education. Shattering for me proved Illich’s deliberate disregard for the types of questions my “best” “critical” and liberal colleagues deemed “big,” “important” and “socially significant,” serving the human good through the educational enterprise.

With a freshly minted Ph.D. in hand in Philosophy of Education, proud of the professional position I had just secured with competitive competence and noble-minded professional zeal at my university where he was visiting for the first of 15 Falls; enjoying the sense of being liberated by my “Equal Educational Opportunity Employer” from the medieval limits that had held back my mother, grandmothers and others doomed for centuries to be the Second Sex, Illich’s *Gender*, just published, like his earlier bestseller, *Deschooling Society* could not but be doubly disturbing.

The Educational Enterprise: a counterproductive soul-shredder, dooming most people on earth to the lowest modern caste: “illiterate,” “uneducated” and “underdeveloped”?

My Equal Educational Opportunity Employer: dooming my gender, almost half the human race to being the mere Second Half—one gender permanently incapacitated by the

system's structured inequalities; designed never to let us "catch up" in the just and noble race for equality?

My most cherished Services Sector's promotion of "self-management...suggest[ive of] masturbation"?

Shell shocked by bombs packaged in a philosophical and literary genre unrecognizable for my educated mind, with all my cunning intellect and analysis honed solid by professional training, I rejected Illich's awful truth: with its threads and inimitable patterns running ceaselessly through all his writings: dismissing in no uncertain terms my work as a liberal, liberating educator; my spanking new professional identity.

What was I supposed to do with Illich's outrageous indictments of my hard won and long-slogged-for professional status as Professor of Education? Quit? Shut my teaching shop? My legitimate, professionally designed courses abandoned? To go sit with my grandmothers knitting booties for their great-grandchildren under the winter Punjab afternoon sun in slow, non-modern time? Or, worse yet, join the ranks of the peasants of subsistence, the latest Luddites, doomed to premature death or inevitable suicide¹ for resisting the engines of modern progress?

Laughable questions, spurred by my reading and listening to Illich! Yet, something stopped me from laughing them away. Neither could I experience these Illich provoked questions as merely theoretical—to be mulled comfortably in the academic armchair; only to be put aside after I took off my "think cap" and got up from theorizing for a hard days work. Pushing me hard towards too many excruciatingly practical questions, Illich's ideas rubbed and rankled. His social statistics, my educated mind's certainties compelled me to conclude, were too "crazy" not to be rigged. "How dared he!" raged the professional within.

Poised and ready to be rid of Illich for the rest of my life—thanks to these conclusions; geared up for the definitive "takeoff" of my professional career, I surprised myself; or, rather, life surprised me—slowing and pausing me longer than was healthy for my professional mind at the tail end of *Deschooling Society*. Fates conspiring, despite myself, I began returning again and again, as ancient mythmakers and storytellers have long known how to return us to ourselves with tales. Illich's retelling of ancient myth in "The Rebirth of Epimethean Man" did just that. Prometheus's lust to play god chained him to his rock. Epimetheus's union with Pandora, the All Giver, married him to the keeper of human hope in the Pythos given her by the Gods; to be at home on Earth – with its illness as much as its wellness. Plato's warnings to philosophers of the likes of Pan's pipes to awaken the instincts and the senses, Illich understood only too well as he played his words at the end of a disturbing book. Pan's lute, these oral myths now put in print, read and re-read, reveal the ancient patterns of tales told long before there was philosophical argument. Leaving behind the analytic tedium of clever point and counterpoint, Illich's prose poems, weaving myth and tale, came to haunt.

Armed well and protected by every contemporary counter-theory conceived to counter every Illichian theory, it is only now, decades later, that I discern how unguarded I remained to the primordial power of myth and song that Illich returns us to after all the numbers and data have been turned in—none in any way able to turn the soul. Ancients, Hindu or Greek, have time tested meter and rhyme to awaken the soul put to sleep by the troubled, troubling mind. Even today, at the core, the dead center of industrially engineered

¹ Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001). Schlosser tells true tales of the grotesque, grizzly, torture and torment meted out to the workers of fast food industrial empires.

Social Systems, mythmakers and storytellers mysteriously arrive at the doorway of the dormant soul, drugged and doped into the modern illusion of awakesness by affluenza.²

Heart broken open by Illich's remembering the perennial human tragedy in "The Rebirth of Epimethean Man," I found myself feeling and sensing what the analytic mind had closed me to in the modern pathos I was living—unconscious and unaware. The contemporary tragedy inherent in the primordial human lust to play god could no longer stay hid from me as I dwelt on every Illich story of technological and institutional prowess and progress—designed to dissect and possess the mysteries the ancients have known belong to the gods. Refusing to learn, moderns attempt to steal as their role model Prometheus did the God's fire, decade after decade, spouting global "Equality, Fraternity, Liberty"; only to see, like Sisyphus, our rock roll right back at the end of the day to where it was before the latest National Policy was mandated and manned with the promise of Progress.

The pain of the perennial human tragedy, just at the moment it becomes unbearably heavy, Illich sings us other songs...contemporary and ancient; turning to Christian or agnostic Saints from Greek heroes. Greek tragedy turned into "hopeful prophecy", Illich remembers, while telling us of the son of the fire thief, Prometheus, "Deucalion, the Helmsman of the Ark who like Noah outrode the Flood to become the father of a new mankind which he made from the earth with Pyrrha, the daughter of Epimetheus and Pandora....who "value hope above expectations...who love people more than products... who love the earth on which each can meet the other,

And if a man lived in obscurity
Making his friends in that obscurity,
Obscurity is not uninteresting."³

In the full face of the fragility of the good, and of the inevitable finality of death, Illich nourishes hope; cultivating and calling us to the ancient virtues of humility and hindsight Epimetheaus exemplified for us: unafraid of marriage; of the feminine; in union, gaining the hindsight, cultivating the hope nourished, like all virtues, not only at Delphi but also in Delhi. Here and now; wherever humans recover the capacity and the humble gaze which reveals to us what, despite their skill in creating beauty, is not in human hands, seeing the Cosmos in the hands God.

Illich's contemporary heroes, Epimethean women and men reborn, are not to be confused with his in-numerable other subjects for reflection and admiration: like the school[wo]men Saints of Chicago, and other urban ghettos; concrete jungles that turn real people into dangerous, destructive monsters, in whose honor Illich sings his little known elegy on education, "The Educational Enterprise in the Light of the Gospel." Sanctifying Doc Thomas MacDonald in Chicago's Goudy Elementary, he describes these many Schindler's of Education, saving their Jews from further filling the fast expanding Prison System of the world's self-promotional "# 1 Nation in Development and Democracy". One of millions of unknown, unsung heroes, Illich pulls their stories out of places like the *Saturday Tribune*: "Principal McDonald reaches up to smooth a shock of white hair that has spilled onto his forehead. He notices the smudge of blood on his hand. Then he lunges, eyes flashing 'give me that pipe'! Circling him in the second-floor hallway are two pre-teen students, Armary Bibs who is armed with a long, unraveled piece of cardboard tubing, and Morris Elliston, who is swinging a stubby piece of copper pipe...'shut up' says Morris...McDonald grabs the pipe."

² Scott Simon, Affluenza. National Public Radio, 2000.

³ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1972), 166-167.

Pedestrian and trite in the dailyness of what millions of Principals endure and what Illich pauses to describe, he explains what likens Saint McDonald of Chicago to Saint Schindler: “they expect nothing from an evil system in which they find themselves except the chance to make its total victims feel that they can beat it....McDonald runs a ‘gravity school’, a sink for the school system’s dregs and wastes. He takes anything which walks in and assigns it to ... courageous old ladies. To let Maurice jab the copper pipe at his behind: is part of the ‘endurance test’ to which he exposes himself in his struggle for these kids...as a distant relative of Schindler.”

After asking the most difficult questions of Thomas Mc Donald’s motivation to do what he does daily with the dregs, Illich can still celebrate him, full of compassion for the futility of principals and teachers like him pushing Sisyphus’s rock up the slopes of all the modern institutions of Services and Self-Management. Other well-intentioned alternative educators, sharing their good intentions, receive Illich’s compassion expressed differently: “Many times women whore just to put food on the table.” Illich reveals no intention to convert these whores into virtuous women. He offers neither priestly, religious nor secular salvation—especially not for the refuseniks and the dropouts and the dregs of the School System’s services.

Biblical stories increasingly became part of Illich’s rich repertoire for reflecting on the human condition. The Good Samaritan’s story told by Jesus to his disciplines; the little Jewish girl being visited by the Archangel, Gabriel, to reveal to her that she is soon to be mother of the son of God—these familiar stories, among others, Illich told and retold in his last decade with his own inimitable flavor; delving deeper and deeper into the infernal depths of “the corruption of Christianity” to explain the corruption of all the caring professions⁴; so far removed from the Sermon on the Mount by the global institution wielding centralized global power from Rome...or other city centers:

The new possibility of personally facing one another has produced as its perversion a vast architecture of *impersonal* institutions all claiming, in some sense, to care. The vast engines of education and health, as much as those of economic and technological development—all derive finally from a cooptation of the gospel’s promise of freedom. Contemporary persons may often live without faith, but they live nonetheless amidst the husks of faith betrayed.⁵

Master of the oral tradition as much as he was of the printed page, no two tellings of Illich’s stories ever came out the same. Each mythic tale was crafted with care even in its improvization; each alive with the spontaneous colors of jazz that the moment of telling demanded, Illich’s ideas had a different vitality in the telling of his stories—especially as he drew upon his own lived experiences with people, famous, infamous or completely unknown. With each telling and retelling, Illich towered taller, as other literary giants before and after his time, including Leo Tolstoy, the creator of *The Death of Ivan Illych*. Tolstoy’s pathetic Illych, the bureaucratic, lay cowering before death; while the real Illich, unafraid of the evils and exclusions meted to the disobedient of banal bureaucracies, bowed before organic death. Illych and other city dwellers doomed themselves to rolling a heavy stone up the hill to the pinnacle of Hell becoming modern day Sisyphus seeking to chain Thanatos. Or Tantalus,

⁴ David Cayley, *The Corruption of Christianity: Ivan Illich on Gospel, Church and Society* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2000), 9.

⁵ Ibid, 9.

“who was invited by the gods to share their meal, and on that occasion stole their secret of how to prepare all-healing ambrosia, which bestowed immortality, suffers eternal hunger and thirst standing in a river of receding waters, overshadowed by fruit trees with receding branches.”⁶

His history of modern needs, daily manufactured, legitimized and given a new lease on life today by the educational systems of consumer societies, with their ever-rising demands, is “not just evil—it can be spoken of only as Hell.”⁷ Tantalus tormented lives; in me and in you, desperately driven to The Mall.

2nd Story—Master Illich: In Flesh and Blood Studied by Teachers-in-the-Making

Students compulsorily enrolled in my Education courses, well trained to grovel for grades, ignore well most of the indignities and losses of freedom Illich reminds us of about the credentialing game. Yet, predictably, they stand ready for fierce battle—even as I did two decades ago—when confronted by Illich’s ideas of soul shredding engineered for the benefit of the elite of every society; for mechanical, managed, time clocked life sped in systems—Educational, Economic, and, best of all, ever-obsolescently Technological.

Techno-fasting? Abandoning the illusion of Progress? A good life lived without cell phones or internet chatrooms?

The silent contempt readable in their bored, masked faces match their explicitly articulated rejection of Illich prose as unreadable; and, worse yet, totally irrelevant to their times. “That guy is another dead, White Man. Why do we have to read his unreadable books and essays?” Too politically correct to ask their Proff such questions out loud in class, yet, they ask in their heavy silent stance ... bodies slouched over with boredom and un-said “yukhs.”

Today, these “yukhs” continue to be as disturbing to me as Illich’s disestablishment of education two decades ago, when I was poised to launch my teaching career. How do I bring Illich to life to challenge their imaginations? How do I invite Illich into our midst? How do I put flesh on his words, so that they move in this room with that unbeatable vitality and aliveness—which even my failing memory of Illich in the Walker and Willard Buildings of Pennsylvania State University cannot erase from my heart and mind?

Moments of desperation, the taste of acrid failure on my tongue, semester after semester, my soul beseeches my muse. Best are those surprising moments, then, when effortlessly, myth and stories flow for me in front of 21-year old teachers-in-the-making, with the freedom they did in the life and work of Master Illich. With my muse moving me, Illich reveals himself even larger than life. Here, before us stands an outspoken priest who saw his way right through the arrogance of cultural and religious prosyletization; who cultivated the courage and faith it takes to engage in the revolutionary acts of “divine disobedience;” unafraid to enter the catacombs to defend his personal truth against institutional might and brute force; who had the savvy and balls it takes to create CIDOC right in the middle of the superhighways of global secular salvation and religious salvation Missions—a language school so effective that even the CIA and the FBI found it irresistible; where, like a magnet, one man drew thinkers from lands distant and near; who could dare to say out loud to the presidents of “free” nations groveling with begging bowls before the Lords of Global Development: “No Golden Gossamer does he really wear! Here, Folks, the Emperor of Global Development stands shamefully Naked.”

⁶ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York: Marion Boyars, 1972), 157.

⁷ Ibid, 157.

Superstar featured dashing, sophisticated and elegant on the covers of newspapers and magazines, his real life, beyond the eyes of cameras, continued to exemplify austerity and askesis. Until his last, Illich remained un-seduceable by the pomp and circumstance of celebrity status. Wide awake, he revealed with fabulous clarity why his grand global successes remained abject failures to stop the Force of the industrial Machine with all of its Service Vendors and Self-Management.

Embracing his worldly failure fully, Illich showed us, that not being a commercial or professional success offers our ordinary genius unlimited contexts and untold possibilities for the humble, the tenuously human; for the “rebirth of Epimetheus”; whose hindsight revealed to him the traditional “art of suffering” as inextricably joined to the arts of dying and living – best practiced among friends.

3rd Story—Beyond the Tragedy of Greek Myth: Organic, Humble Death and Dying at Home

Neither excruciating illness nor inevitable death daunted Illich in his last decades on earth. Vital and creative unto his last, he remained undaunted by both indescribable physical pain and profound sadness for *homo miserabilis* [modern man’s misery made worse by growing addiction to techno-treatments, heaped on top of bereavement counseling and masturbatory self-help] on his quest for practicing, wherever he chose to be on his pilgrimage on earth, the virtues that define the rebirth of Epimetheus.

Simultaneously a wandering half-Jew and Catholic ex-priest, he carried his tent with him wherever he went; pitching it always in the down-to-earth settlements created by friends for nourishing friendship. Amongst his friends, Illich died in his simple bed, even as he had lived – free from all the state-of-the-art treatment technologies. He cultivated the art of dying which his much celebrated peasants practiced, even in the full face of the war on subsistence waged by moderns against them all over our good earth. The revulsion he received for the growing growth on his cheek drew from him even greater compassion for those caught in the professional clutches of Service and Self-Management therapies. Needing neither variety of crutch, Illich walked to the last on his own feet towards the Doorway of his Death, mowing down illusion after illusion of basic human needs—for Health Care and death-denying Techno-fixes for cancer prevention and care;⁸ celebrating for others the freedom that comes from knowing the “enoughness” humans enjoy wherever they embrace graceful limits; the limits that come of necessity with tools for conviviality.

Almost two years after his “passing on,” his reappearance for some of us was most deliciously sensed in the gathering, “friends of Ivan Illich,” created last month by Dan Grego in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Our teacher’s art of hospitality, exquisitely brought alive and celebrated by Dan Grego, further reaffirmed for me that Illich stands in our midst larger than life when friends gather to break bread together; savor simple, good food and wine; laugh and weep, celebrate and mourn together the *conditio humana*; re-membering in the fragility and tenuosness of the good, shared with each other in breaking bread, in songs, story and myth; told and re-told; every little telling a part of the all-too-human unfolding epic.

Do we continue to enjoy the rebirth of Illich’s Epimethean women and men? As the wine and the conversation flowed within the warm heart of Milwaukee, at the center of Grego’s circle of Illich friends, again and again we sensed and celebrated the hope Illich cultivated. “To hell with good intentions” to “save the world” is as much a part of the cultivation of Illich’s hope, as is escaping the doomsday tales told by religious Fundamentalists, eco-minded Environmentalists and other promoters of Apocalyptic

⁸ Manu Kothari and Lopa Mehta, *The Nature of Cancer* (Goa, India: The Other India Press, 1973).

Randiness. Recognizing well that we constituted no “elite corps” of Epimethean women and men, I found myself grateful for the moments of clarity and common sense that come in little niches, little circles of friendship which flower despite the fact that we all still live in Absurdistan. Despite “growing up absurd,” despite the perversity of the wars being waged around us for no good reason; despite gazing at our own tragic role in the *conditio humana*, here we enjoy each others’ trust, just as Illich trusted the human goodness he smelled with his large Jewish nose. Illich reiterated for me the importance of trusting my own Punjabi nose (denigrated “underdeveloped”) that smelled out so well the “stuff” found in the commons of common men and women: in every culture, every tradition, still alive, even though surrounded by the plague of modernity.

Author’s Bio

Madhu Suri Prakash is a Professor of philosophy of education at The Pennsylvania State University. She is the co-author of *Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures* and *Escaping Education: Living as Learning at the Grassroots*. Both books have been inspired by the ideas of Ivan Illich. Most recently she is a contributor to *YES! Magazine*.