

REMEMBERING ILLICH'S CONVIVIUM*

by Samar Farage

A l'uomo che cavalca lungamente per terreni selvatici viene desiderio d'una città. Finalmente giunge a Isidora. Città dove i palazzi hanno scale a chiocciola incrostate di chioccioline marine, dove si fabbricano a regola d'arte cannocchiali e violini, dove quando il forestiero è incerto tra due donne ne incontra sempre una terza, dove le lotte dei galli degenerano in risse sanguinose tra gli scommettitori. A tutte queste cose egli pensava quando desiderava una città. Isidora è dunque la città dei suoi sogni: con una differenza. La città sognata conteneva lui giovane: a Isidora arriva in tarda età. Nella piazza c'è il muretto dei vecchi che guardano passare al gioventù; lui è seduto in fila con loro. I desideri sono già ricordi.
(Calvino: *Le città e la memoria*)

When a man rides a long time through wild regions he feels the desire for a city. Finally he comes to Isidora, a city where the buildings have spiral staircases encrusted with spiral seashells, where perfect telescopes and violins are made, where the foreigner hesitating between two women always encounters a third, where cockfights degenerate into bloody brawls among the bettors. He was thinking of all these things when he desired a city.

* A slightly different version of this essay was originally delivered in Lucca on 2003 and then published in International Journal of Illich Studies under the title *Conversations around the table*, in 2013.

Isidora, therefore, is the city of his dreams: with one difference. The dreamed-of city contained him as a young man; he arrives at Isidora in his old age. In the square there is the wall where the old men sit and watch the young go by; he is seated in a row with them. Desires are already memories.

In Florence, during the autumn of 2002, for one hour each day, the voice of Ivan sounded these lines again and again in his effort at teaching me Italian. He believed that memorizing such beautiful lines would lead me to love a language he felt entirely at home in; a language that in its rhythms and silences profoundly resonated his yearnings for the blue waters of the Adriatic, for the green hills dotted with olive trees, the landscape that evoked the atmosphere of his childhood.

Today, many years later, his voice still faintly accompanies these lines from Calvino but his glittering eyes and benevolent smile are not there to forgive me my mistakes. I have attempted to speak Italian with his Italian friends several times not only because I think he would have insisted that my fear not overshadow my respect for his listeners, but also as a homage to his efforts to teach me. I trusted that they would excuse my mistakes. Even though Ivan is no longer here physically, I suspect that for many of those who have known him well, he is somewhere close, laughing gently, his toes dipped in the waters of Lethe that wash memories from the feet of the dead and carries them to the pool of Mnemosyne where poets can find them.

I would like to write about a theme that was fundamental to Illich's life, thought and writings, though one that was not often noted: how to foster and cultivate the ground for friendship, as the ability to face one another in a mutual commitment to the truth. In this short paper, I can only give a glimpse of the importance he placed on friendship; on how

he practiced friendship through conversations around a table.

Illich described his life as a pilgrimage among friends. Reflecting on what mattered most deeply to him, he stated it with surprising simplicity: to pursue disciplined and committed learning with a group of friends who trust one another. It is best to hear him again describing what, I have come to believe, was the central question guiding his work. He asked: “How I can live in the world into which I was born, the world where I experience increasingly that I am caught in a kind of imprisonment? How can I be true to whoever stands before me? How do I keep a space open when I find myself in the face and pupil of the other while the other finds himself in my face and gaze?”

In the light of these questions, his critique of modernity and technology attains a new coherence and clarity: The gift and surprise that is the Other can only wander in when that space is open. The immediacy, intimacy and freedom of my encounter with the other is threatened and even destroyed by what he once called non-convivial tools: for example, by schools that package knowledge and grade people; by diagnoses that prevent the arts of healing and suffering; by professions that impute needs to their clients; by screens that hide you from me. The question of how to be true to the one who stands before me is central because, ethics, in a world without an *ethnos*, can only truly be rooted in my relation to someone and not guided by unquestioned submission to positive laws and abstract norms.

Ivan was able to capture how artifacts deform and distort sensual perceptions in his unique way because he was an old witch. As he said, “I am hedge-straddler, a *zaunreiter* in German, which is an old name for a witch. With one foot I stand on my home ground in the tradition of Catholic philosophy in which more than two dozen generations have prayerfully cultivated a garden into whose trees they carefully graft-

ed pagan Greek and Roman shoots. My other foot, the one dangling on the outside is heavy with mud clots and scented by exotic herbs through which I have trampled.” Elsewhere, he introduced himself as a xenocryst, a mineral foreign to the rock in which it is embedded or as an extravagant thinker: from *extra-vagare*, he who walks outside.

Ivan felt estranged in a world where increasingly our feelings and thoughts about others and ourselves are deliberated designed. Estrangement did not lead him to withdraw from the world—but to live in it with courage and clarity. In this modern desert, his search for truth—*philosophia*-- was oriented by and in the service of *philia*-- friendship. In this, he emulated his master and friend from the 12th century, the philosopher Hugh of St. Victor who had said: “For I was a foreigner and met you in a strange land, but the land was not really strange for I found friends there. I don’t know whether I first made friends or was made one, but I found charity there and I loved it; and could not tire of it for it was sweet to me, and I filled my heart with it, and was sad that my heart could hold so little. I could not take in all there was, but I took in as much as I could. I filled up all the space I had but I could not fit in all I found. So I accepted what I could, and weighed down with this precious gift, I did not feel any burden because my full heart sustained me. And now, having made a long journey, I find my heart still warmed, and none of the gift has been lost; for charity never ends.”

The question of how to face the other invokes the question of the Good as what is appropriate, fitting and harmonious. This question cannot be answered in schools and universities, which historically have been founded on the separation of sensual and ascetical living from critical intellectual pursuits, of habits of the heart and habits of the mind. In fact, such institutionalized learning is almost the enemy of learning how to live virtuously with the other. It contributes instead to

deepening the sterile and senseless indifference towards the Other and reality. Universities have become cold laboratories where the absolute nature of the Good has been replaced by a relative calculus of positive and negative values. As such, universities have eroded our ability to trust our common sense as our guide for what is most fitting and proportionate, what the Greeks called *mesotes* or middle ground. Common sense, our first organ of judgment, was a physical faculty located in the heart for Aristotle and in the anterior cavity in the head for medieval philosophers. Historically, the common sense or *sensus communis* was the passage way between the external senses and internal senses. It was the site for the proportionate comingling of the senses before passage to the intellect, a sensual grasping of the world, best expressed in the medieval adage: “*nihil potest esse in intellectu si non fuerat prius in sensu.*” With modern philosophy, such wisdom is reversed. Sense perception is doubted, mind and body are separated and people feel what has first been abstractly constructed in thought. The statement ushering modernity is Descartes’ “I think therefore I am.” This modern position sums up the disenfranchisement and disembodiment that Ivan fought against.

Illich’s critique of schools, universities and institutions was hence a critique of their power to hinder our ability to live decently with one another. Early on, he gave “*faute de mieux*” the name “research by people” to the disciplined search for truth outside institutions. He contrasted “research or science for people” conducted in the universities, with “science by people”: a type of research that is not sponsored by corporate clients, not published in prestigious academic journals and without much value for the supermarket. Such research done alone or in small groups has a direct bearing on the one who is engaged in it. Such research directly transforms who we are and how we live with one another. It permits a hospitable and convivial conversation. Illich stated

that: 'learned and leisured hospitality is the only antidote to the stance of deadly cleverness that is acquired in the pursuit of objectively secured knowledge.' He called it "conversations around a table," for what is better than a table to allow guests and host to face each other generously in a common pursuit?

A table is the occasion for the gathering of friends engaged in serious inquiry on matters that have a direct bearing on how they live, points to how, for Illich, philosophy always implied a way of life, a daily endeavor, a practice of graceful playfulness. Wherever he went a table was set: a host would invite the guests over a threshold to a table where others assembled; to a place that was personal without being private. This open and generous hospitality was symbolized by a candle that stood lit on the table: a flame that stood for a third that could knock at the door. There were no stated rules, but friends partaking the soup ensured that the table was set, dishes were washed, and soup was stretched for the latecomers. This studium was a convivium.

The conversation around the table was unrelenting but disciplined. The rigor demanded by Illich implied an *askesis*, a training into arts of thinking and virtuous living so they become a second nature. It implied the cultivation of a *hexis*, a stance in the world. The *askesis* of friendship also implied rigorous cultivation of habits of the mind in concordance to habits of the heart. He often spoke with the Cappadocian fathers, of *nepsis*, a guarding of the senses from the allurements of images and artifacts in order to purify and sharpen them. For an Aristotelian, all senses converge in the heart. Thus to avoid staining the heart, one should guard the eyes to avoid phantasms of optical make-believe; one should free the sense of smell in order to inhale the other and tune our ears to listen for harmonies in the words of our friend.

Friendship was an ongoing practice that cultivated a mutual trust, respect and commitment. He sometimes made

me smile, with embarrassment, with his simple statement: "Tell me what to do and I will obey you." For us moderns, obedience is a strange concept and harsh burden; for Illich, fidelity between friends demanded obedience to each other. In his conversations with Cayley, he explains: "Obedience in the biblical sense means unobstructed listening, unconditional readiness to hear, and untrammelled disposition to be surprised by the Other's word. ...When I submit my heart, my mind and my body I come to be below the other. When I listen unconditionally, respectfully, courageously with the readiness to take in the other as a radical surprise, I do something else. I bow, I bend over the total otherness of someone. But I renounce searching for bridges between the other and me, recognizing the gulf that separates us. Leaning into this chasm makes aware of the depth of my loneliness and able to bear it in the light of the substantial likeness between the other and myself. All that reaches me in the other is his word, which I accept on faith. But by the strength of this word, I now can trust myself to walk on the surface without being engulfed by institutional power..." Ivan was an exemplary model of such complete openness. Anyone who has met him remembers his total presence in both body and mind in his devotion to friends.

Philosophical quest in the company of friends implied a criticism of everything that made life unphilosophical, everything "that castrates and sterilizes the heart and enervates ethical sensibilities." The refinement of the habits of the mind implied first a distancing from certainties of the present, or an estrangement from what is familiar and taken for granted. Such distancing is necessary, Ivan thought, to free oneself from disabling perceptions and beliefs. He used historical studies as a road to gain such distance and often anchored himself in the study of changing word fields: by listening to their sounds and uncovering their historicity, Ivan

shook up the foundations of modern prejudices. He used to say that even verbs have a history: in the age of the car, walking becomes a different activity; in the age of the image, seeing changes; in the age of the screen, reading no longer signifies what it did for the pre-12th century philosopher.

To understand ourselves better by weakening our certainties, Illich recommended a historiography described beautifully by one of his friends, Ludolf Kuchenbuch, as a “like a crab crawling through landscapes of past innocence.” When faced by a danger most animals turn around and run away, but the crab crawls backwards while its bulging eyes remain fixed on the object it flees: the recovery of the past necessitates never forgetting the present danger. Historical excursions of this kind were demanded by Illich not only to distance ourselves but also to protect us against excessive sentimentalism and apocalyptic exaggeration. He insisted on a clear-eyed renunciation of fantasies of power to change the world. Instead of feeling responsibility for the world’s problems, Illich recommended an attitude of wakeful hope.

I remember his recounting, as a parable, the courage of his friend Helder Camara, a Brazilian priest under the dictatorship, who when asked how he faced the horror of the atrocious acts he had witnessed, replied: “you must never give up. As long as a person is alive, somewhere beneath the ashes there is a bit of remaining fire and our entire task is to blow very carefully...you’ll see whether it lights up. You must not worry whether it takes fire again or not. All you have to do is blow.” For Illich, all we could often do is to carry a candle in the dark, be a candle in the dark, know that you are a flame in the dark.

Ivan found the word “Peace” to describe or explain what he hoped for and worked towards all his life. He has wonderfully explained this in his text “The Cultivation of Conspiracy,” from which I draw freely now. Ivan argued that

each circle of friends engenders its own aura, its atmosphere. Atmosphere is the “smell,” the emanation that gives each table, each gathering, its unique and personal quality. Every place has a smell and still in German one can say, “I can smell you well”; or say, “I can suffer you” to his friend. Atmosphere can only emerge when people face each other in trust. After 30 years of reflection and thinking, he found the word *pax* or “peace” to be most suitable for naming this atmosphere or aura created by a circle of friends engaged in joint study oriented by and devoted to mutual commitment and fidelity. In retracing the particular historical nature of the foundation of European communities, he states that peace was never an abstract condition but for each community a specific spirit to be cherished in its uniqueness. This spirit was sealed by the *conspiratio* or *osculum*: the mouth to mouth kiss or sharing of breath by which participants in a community (called the *ecclesia*) shared their breath with one another and their union with one holy spirit. Around 300 BCE, *pax* became a key word in the Christian liturgy, camouflaging the scandalous nature of the *osculum*. The European roots of peace are synonymous with this somatic incorporation of equals into a community.

The atmosphere of Illich’s *convivium* was one of *sobria ebrietas*- drunken sobriety: pleasurable study, graceful playfulness, and embodied reading. In this, he followed the advice of his teacher Hugh of St. Victor who stood against hundreds of years of Christian shunning of the flesh and the laughter that might ripple it and encouraged his teaching monks to foster merriment, “for serious matters are absorbed more easily and with more pleasure when mixed with humor.” For his friends and for me, the gift of his friendship has been our candle in the dark. Ivan and I did not finish reading Calvino together, but the choice of the path described in the last lines of the book could not have been made clear without him:

L'inferno dei viventi non è qualcosa che sarà; se c'è ne uno, è quello che è già qui, l'inferno che abitiamo tutti i giorni, che formiamo stando insieme. Due modi ci sono per non soffrirne. Il primo riesce facile a molti: accettare l'inferno e diventarne parte fino al punto di non vederlo più. Il secondo è rischioso ed esige attenzione e apprendimento continui; cercare e saper riconoscere, chi e cosa, in mezzo all'inferno, non è inferno, e farlo durare e dargli spazio. (Marco polo a Kublay Khan)

The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one, it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space.