Between the Vernacular and Surprise

by Tobais Roberts

When my third child was born, I spent two days sitting in a hospital lobby with nothing more than my thoughts, my trepidations, and a paperback novel found in the reading corner of that hospital lobby. Charles Frazier's novel "13 Moons" was an appropriate read for that moment of profound waiting. Towards the end of the novel, as my baby girl was moving into the light of this world, the main character of the novel says this:

> In the old days within Granny Squirrel's recollection, before the arrival of the Spaniards and their metal hats, living long was different. Little changed during your span of time, birth to death. Individual people, of course, came and went, but that's the unfortunate transitory nature of people. The physical world surrounding you, though, remained about the same from start to finish. Short of utter apocalypse, the landscape was what it was throughout one's brief life… All that you had learned in childhood remained largely in effect lifelong. When you got old and approached death, it was not an unrecognizable world you left, for we had not yet learned how to break it apart. Back then, about all that changed during your time on earth was that a few big trees had fallen and many new trees had grown in their places. Trunk diameter, really, was all that was in question. Whether you measured the span with your thumb and forefinger or your outstretched arms…All I can say is that we are mistaken to gouge such a deep rift in history that the things old men

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> and old women know have become so useless as to be not worth passing on to grandchildren.

If we live in an age that has discovered how to break the world apart, the constant movement of people is both a criterion for that capacity, and a result of its unforeseen aftereffects. The learned wisdom of placed-ness through generations could only be shattered by a people who thought there was somewhere else beckoning them. And when the stability of places where change is measured by "trunk diameter" is upended, then mobility becomes a necessary survival mechanism.

Ivan Illich was a wanderer and a pilgrim throughout his life. Having had his home taken from him at such a young age, he was moved into a life of exile, movement, and constant peregrination through the world. Today, for most, that life of constant, itinerant movement is the norm rather than the exception.

Unlike Illich, I never had a true place of belonging that was taken from me by the violence of a world breaking apart. Rather, I was born into the placeless world that inevitably ensues from our constant "taking apart." Perhaps it was because of this migratory, nomadic, and deracinated nature of my generation that I yearned for a place of belonging and rootedness; for a world measured by the slow thickening of old growth trees. Wendell Berry´s novels, together with the opportunity to participate, in some sense, in the rooted, territorial life and traditions of the Mayan Ixil people of northern Guatemala, eventually led my wife and I onto a small plot of land in the northern mountains of El Salvador where one of our first tasks was to plant the trees whose widening girth might be the measure of change in this place we seek to inhabit.

Here on our small mountain farm, we also receive a fair number of drifters—mostly younger people born into that uprooted world and into that generation where the idea

of home was never a settled place of generational tenancy. They come for a day or a week, do the obligatory hikes that are recommended on TripAdvisor or some other digital platform that reduces our little mountain community to a few recommended "musts," take some pictures, and then move on to the next place on the list.

Far from the rootless drifting of so many digital nomads, backpackers, and social media influencers that make their way to our farm today, the wandering nature of Illich's life was evidently deeper than the mobile crowds of today. His movement was never through places, but *into* them.

It was this unique character of his wandering that appears to have allowed him to develop a profound deference and regard for the vernacular: that which is "homebred, homespun, homegrown, homemade." It's interesting: a person without a lasting home of his own, but who nonetheless was intent on trying to "*bring into awareness and discussion the existence of a vernacular mode of being, doing, and making that in a desirable future society might again expand in all aspects of life*."[1] He was a self-described "errant pilgrim" who nonetheless was able to find immense value in the subsistence of those whose lives were completely rooted to the boundaries and possibilities of a specific territory.

Despite his affection for Puerto Rico, his community in Ocotpec, and his later life in Bremen, his life was never delineated by a territory where the vernacular and the "homeworld ethos"[2] of a specific place became normative to the shared life of that space. Precisely because of this, I think, he was able to cultivate a theology of the surprise; of being ever aware and open to the possibilities of the Incarnation; of hav-

1 Ivan Illich, "The War against Subsistence" in *Shadow Work*, 57-58.

2 Edmund Husserl described the homeworld ethos as the familiar, taken-for-granted, and comfortable sphere of everyday experience that serves as the foundation for all knowledge and understanding.

ing the itinerant eyes needed to see Christ in whoever's path his pilgrimage crossed.

Unlike the so many errant pilgrims of modern times, Illich sought his way into the depths of the uniqueness of the places that the freedom of surprise led him. And thus, he was able to discern the exceptionality of the vernacular; of the abundance capable of emerging from lives of subsistence; and of placed and rooted lives that continued to stubbornly resist the siren call to join in the breaking apart of the world and to mobilize one's self in the pursuit of the spoils of that breaking apart.

I think that this ability to live in between the vernacular and the surprise is what made Illich uniquely inspirational to so many people. His profound openness to the freedom that occurs when embracing the susceptibility of surprise was also rooted to the goodness found in lives of subsistence and placed-ness. His candidness in seeking the profound freedom to live and love beyond the boundaries of tradition specifically sought out those places where rooted cultures flowered from the solidity of tradition that provides time-tested strategies for thriving within the limits of a shared geography; of learning to live within a territory and discover the abundance within restraint.

One of Illich's greatest gifts was his ability to walk the tightrope between the vernacular and the surprise, and though I don't believe he ever mentioned this specifically, one unheralded character of the Good Samaritan story that he so appreciated provides us an example of how to do this faithfully.

The Samaritan Remedying with Surprise

Much has been written and said about Illich's great affinity for the parable of the Good Samaritan. He saw this parable as encompassing the true novelty, freedom, and goodness that the Incarnation offered. And as he points out time and time again, the question posed to Jesus is not "how should I act

towards a certain situation," but rather: "who is my neighbor."

In the parable, the Samaritan *came where the man was,* whereas the priest and the Levite *passed by on the other side*. This "passing by" is an evident "malfunction" of the "ethos of an ethnos," because one of the defining elements of living in place is the dimension of shared space; of there not being "another side" where one can hide from the shared lives that transpire within the shared boundaries of a shared territory. This proximity of proverbial small-town life is often ridiculed as parochial; the claustrophobic nearness where "everyone knows everyone" and where the required, private space of the individual (perhaps another modern certainty) is relentlessly trampled on.

Notwithstanding the parochial and sometimes restrictive boundaries of place-based cultures, a sense of territorial rootedness that was functional would simply not allow for one to pass by on the other side. The Samaritan moves into that unoccupied space to fill this void of a malfunctioning territorial ethos by reconstructing the sense of shared space when he chooses to "come to where the man was." The compassionate response and the being moved in one's bowels is thus dependent upon occupying that shared space. The common belonging of Jewish neighbors had been unheeded by the priest and the Levite. In the case of the Samaritan, the shared space is not ethnic or national in nature. Rather, it is the shared space of travelers on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho; the common nature of fellow travelers through this life. It is a common belonging that arises from the novelty of the Incarnation and of the freedom to react in love beyond the boundaries of our comfortable sphere of vernacular life.

Of course, that space was not the Samaritan's to fill, following from the traditional norms of the territorial ethos. As Illich says, his action of coming to the beaten man was

"utterly destructive of ethical decency"[3] because that space wasn't open to him, and shouldn't have been open to him had the territorial ethos functioned properly. However, as Illich so often said, the Incarnation allows for surprise to creep into the dusty corners of the territorial ethos we are born into and which often grows stale through repetition and routine. It allows for the freedom to choose not only "who will be my neighbor" and "who I will act as a neighbor towards," but it also allows for the radical freedom to step into those spaces and territories that are not mine by inheritance.

Like the Samaritan, I think Illich's life is an example of the brilliant receptivity towards Incarnational surprise. However, Illich was also deeply aware of the possibility for corruption in a life of surprise untethered to rooted responsibilities and the propriety of right living as defined by shared space. Perhaps we could say he grounded the possibility for surprise in his esteem for the vernacular. The freedom of Incarnational surprise was oriented towards re-rooting that love and friendship in real places of rooted tradition. Without those roots, the mysterious evil of the corruption of the best is always lurking around the corner.

The Innkeeper

The unsung character in Illich's favorite parable is perhaps the most essential, though one who is almost always overlooked as a simple placeholder in the story. The innkeeper, we are told, takes in a bloodied, bandaged, and half-dead neighbor and is entrusted to "take care of him." Though he is offered financial compensation for this task, there is no argument or refutation of this responsibility from the innkeeper. He didn't fret about blood on his bedding, worry about potentially driving away other customers with this horrid looking

3 *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*, House of Anansi, 2004, p. 51

fellow, nor tell the Samaritan that it would be more reasonable to find a doctor, or to call the authorities.

Unlike the priest and the Levite, the territorial ethos is still functional in the innkeeper. By the virtues of neighborliness, he knows that he shares in the life of this fellow Jew and has a duty of responsibility for his wellbeing. Maybe we can even imagine that Jesus was trying to redeem the innkeeper vocation from those older innkeepers who had denied a space to his pregnant mother.

The Samaritan, as a traveler and a guest in the territorial ethos that he willingly entered upon by drawing close to the wounded Jew, was unique in that he allowed the dimension of surprise to redefine for him who his neighbor was to be in the incarnational moment of this otherwise ordinary walk down to Jericho. However, in approaching the innkeeper, the Samaritan also recognizes the limitations in his ability to embody true neighborliness. The openness to surprise in the moment which "extends the Incarnation" in the parable of the Samaritan ultimately looks to the stability of a vernacular ethos to embody that surprising openness to love.

As a fellow traveler on the road, the Samaritan didn't have a home where he could invite the wounded man. He didn't have a bed that he could offer him. He didn't have at hand a kitchen where a meal could be prepared to nurse the wounded stranger back to health, nor an extra pair of clothing to offer the poor, bloodied guy.

Perhaps the two denarii he offered were the last coins in his pocket. As revolutionary, heroic, and necessary as his initial response to the incarnational moment was; as important a lesson in Incarnational freedom his reaction to the wounded man embodies, would the Samaritan's response have been as world-shattering had there not been an innkeeper in the story who maintained some semblance of devotion to the territorial ethos of a shared place? Would we remem-

ber the Samaritan's act if, after that initial bandaging of the wounds, the poor, battered Jew eventually died after the Samaritan continued on his way to Jericho? Might the innkeeper's silent acceptance of the quotidian neighborly response be that which gives light and meaning to the Samaritan's act of purely free and unbounded compassion?

I don't mean to imply that the innkeeper's role is simply pragmatic or that a vernacular ethos is simply useful in a functional and effective sense. I think it would be reductive to only esteem the innkeeper's contribution to the situation in light of its utilitarian value. David Cayley, quoting Claus Held, says that "actively compassionate love cannot take the place of a historically developed ethos. Agape can only intervene as a corrective, when a pregiven ethos breaks down."

Without an innkeeper whose actions are not defined by revolutionary surprise, but rather by the conventional compliance with the vernacular ethos, the corruption that Illich saw so clearly becomes evident. If the Samaritan had no place to return the wounded man, and if there was no innkeeper available to engage in the routine, unheralded, and mundane tasks of nursing the poor fellow back to health, then eventually the practical responsibilities resulting from the Samaritan's freedom would have to be institutionalized by religion or by state bureaucracy. Someone would have to deal with the long-term duties that were born from the agape moment of surprising love that the Samaritan shows.

Without the innkeeper, the corruption of the best necessarily becomes the worst. The openness to surprise which is essential to living an incarnational life is reliant on the continued stability of the vernacular tradition, the territorial ethos, and the homeworlds that too often atrophy into the disregard and neglect of responsibility exemplified by the priest, the Levite, and indeed the whole of modernity who would much prefer to entrust or outsource responsibility for the wounded

men in our midst to the authorities and institutions. The freedom of surprise compels the tethers of vernacular tradition. The inspiration of the Incarnational moment needs the pragmatism of placed peoples.

A World Deprived of Homeworlds

What to make, then, of a world where the pregiven ethos of a vernacular territory has been systematically erased over generations of taking apart the worlds of old? Should we focus on acts of agape as a corrective, or in the necessary tasks of rebuilding those vernacular spaces where the rooted ethos can reemerge?

Illich believes, I think, that the re-construction of a sense of rooted belonging and a territorial ethos in this world that has been broken apart by our constant mobility will require an element of surprise. At the end of *Gender*, Illich writes: "I strongly suspect that a contemporary art of living *can* be recovered…The hope for such a life rests upon the rejection of sentimentality and on openness to surprise."[4]

The contemporary art of a rediscovered vernacular realm where a rooted ethos can begin to slowly re-emerge requires the openness to surprise. In the modern world governed by novelty, mobility, and constant change, discovering the goodness of a world where change is measured by the annual rings of thickening wood on old growth trees will require an element of surprise. In a sense, the task of rebuilding the inns for innkeepers will be contingent upon our ability to be surprised by the profound goodness that can be created in the vernacular realm.

Cayley, again discussing Held's analysis of the Samaritan parable, notes that the Samaritan's free and open response to the surprise of the Incarnational moment occurs in a "no

4 Ivan Illich, *Gender*, Marion Boyars 1982.

man's land – an area where the referential contexts of the two worlds in effect cancel each other." The failure of the priest and Levite create an opportunity for the Samaritan, who "in establishing a relationship with the man in the ditch begins a new world and thus demonstrates a power that has been super-added to him through the Incarnation, not one that could ever belong to his natural repertoire. He acts, as Illich repeatedly says, on a call."

With the deepest esteem for the pockets of indigeneity in this broken-apart world, I think it is safe to say that most of us are living in a permanent "no man's land" today: a space where any sort of referential context for ethical action has been replaced by the free-for-all of individual hedonism and the acquiescence towards institutional management to deal with the inconvenient beaten and bloodied men in the ditches of modernity.

The transient nature of our broken-apart world, the lack of belonging, the loss of tradition, the compulsion to untethered mobility: all of these characteristics of the modern moment have left us without a vernacular grounding for ethical action that arises from the solidity of tradition, territory, and time.

But maybe there is an opportunity hiding in the brokenness of the vernacular realm. Illich says in, *Towards a History of Needs,* that "only free men can change their minds and be surprised; and while no men are completely free, some are freer than others."

Maybe somewhat ironically, the posturing sovereignty of modernity with all its emphasis on atomized individuals, digital omnipotence, and untethered mobility may have left open fissures where freedom, as the openness to surprise, might emerge. In these fissures, perhaps we can discover a new world that combines the openness to surprise in the Samaritan with the rooted responsibility of the

innkeeper. The grace that invites us to "extend the Incarnation" in free and unobstructed acts of love also summons us to send down roots into a certain soil of this given earth to construct pathways of vernacular tradition that create space for that love to flourish.