

Remembering Ivan Illich

By Peter Warshall (2003)

This last time I saw Ivan was at the University of San Francisco. At the pre-lecture dinner, he as ever blossomed, talking of the replacement of Good by Values, the instrumentality of prayer, the false embodiment of intentions in food. What was lovely, if not spectacular, about Ivan was his memory of specific conversations that he had with you or someone that had nurtured the emergence of a crisp, clear and heartfelt idea. "Remember, the spaghetti dinner in Cuernavaca in 1984, when you asked about the cognitive judgment of gender..." To him, conviviality was the brains.

As he chatted to students and admirers, sadly I engraved his elegant profile—the long forehead and Spanish nose, the thin cheeks and strong chin—into my cortex. On one side, his face remained intense, handsome. The other had sprouted a cancer about the size and shape of a small head of cauliflower, as if a giant mushroom were pushing his skin out from his jaw, slowly breaking to the surface. Only the soup and sucking the chocolate cover off the strawberries seemed pleasurable. Solid food had become painful. I thought how many people must have appeared as he did, in the period of history he loved and knew so well, the medieval, a period when Good was not so problematic.

When others headed to the auditorium, he asked if I would bar entry to the dining room and, removing his opium pipe, sucked hard. I stood, back flat to the door, thinking about trying some too. But his was an act of ritual as much as an act of remedy, of plant powers from the medieval period; this was old medicine, the poppy's blood, not refined into morphine patches. This was a direct connect—pain, body, and nature—not techno-medicine maniacally determined to prolong life.

We walked down the steep hill to the auditorium, my hand lightly grabbing his elbow or arm as one should not walk opiated. I thought of Bach fugues that stars make in opium dreams as the vehicular headlights and car brakes canon-balled our eyes and ears, and listened to the renegade Priest Illich, now already out-there, half-crossed-over, reveling in divine luminescences and ether-wind tongues. I was, for some reason, smiling big, thoroughly charmed, hearing childhood echoes: "Grandfather, yes grandfather."

When on a roll, Ivan could never be comprehended easily. His genius, a genius of radical anthropology, required thoughts on thoughts. Hard to describe. By analogy, it went something like this. Think of the layering of mathematics. There are, to start with, simply numbers. Add an unknown (x, y) and you have algebra; apply algebra and you have geometry; add the notion of infinity and you generate a calculus of space; remove the boundaries of space and there lies Einstein and cosmology. Ivan gallivanted from numbers to cosmology; around and back, with a mounted knight's ease. He never remained at any one level (let's say, numbers, number theory, and probability). He, like no one I have ever read or met, saw that one-level of perceiving is a mind-trap set by culture, isolating the intellect from the ultimate cosmos/conviviality of love.

That night, he tried to guide the audience in a leap from Medieval Greek *caritas* (caring love) to social welfare programs (secular charity). He traced the secular illusion that a society could actually organize "caring" as "charity"—from Arab way-homes to Christian sick houses (we're at about 1100 AD) and onward to modern welfare state education and medicine. By then, with the interventions of hospital technology, the bureaucracy of nursing and specialists, caring became a simulacra, a mask of love.

At the close of his talk, literally on his knees, Ivan beseeched some closeted heart of humanity to find its way back to *caritas*. A former Jew, defrocked by the Vatican. Isn't his a familiar story? and his life the eternal crucial query?