CHAPTER TWELVE

The Mess We’re In: How Ivan Illich Revealed to Me That the American Dream Is Actually a Nightmare

Aaron Falbe

Reading the books and essays of Ivan Illich is a little like hearing an air-raid siren in the midst of a calm. “Why is this siren going off?” one is tempted to ask. “We are not under attack, we are not in any danger; it must be a false alarm.” But the more one reads and thinks about what this man has to say, the more one begins to see that we are indeed in grave danger—a danger entirely of our own making.

The surprising and deeply radical aspect of what Illich has to say is that the danger stems not just from the obvious sources (say, the military, or the hegemony of multinational corporations) but more fundamentally from those elements of modernity that appear to most people as undeniable benefits: education, health care, transportation, equality of the sexes, communication, self-help, labor-saving machines, economic development, and so on. Partisans of both Left and Right politics see these things as the fruits of progress and, as such, lie outside the sphere of critical debate. They constitute what Illich calls modern certainties. But Ivan Illich, almost alone among scholars and intellectuals, trains his critical gaze on precisely these unquestioned benefits, and sounds the alarm: Corruptio optimi quae est pessimal (Corruption of the best is the worst).

In this chapter, I look at the two aspects of Illich’s critique that have influenced me the most, namely, his writings on technology and education. I will then examine how Illich’s emphasis on friendship can be seen as a thread that ties all his work together, and onto which we might attach some form of hope in these dark times.
I grew up in an era—the 1960s—in which technology was looked upon as an unqualified good thing. Earth Day, and the ecological consciousness that came with it, was yet unknown. The Apollo moon shot captured everyone’s imagination and attention. True, there was the atomic bomb and napalm, but these evils belonged to the separate demonic category of warfare. Technology meant progress. It would free people from arduous, backbreaking labor. Modern conveniences would make life easier and more pleasant, and through mass-production techniques, these benefits would be made available to all. The promise of technology was the promise of a bright, rosy future.

Not so, warned Ivan Illich. “We must come to admit,” he writes in *Tools for Conviviality*, “that only within limits can machines take the place of slaves; beyond these limits they lead to a new type of servitude” (p. xii).¹ By the time I read those words, in the mid-1980s, I already knew that modern technology fostered such unwanted by-products as pollution and environmental degradation. But this news that we were being enslaved by our tools seemed surprising. Illich goes on:

An individual relates himself in action to his society through the use of tools that he actively masters, or by which he is passively acted upon. To the degree that he masters his tools, he can invest the world with meaning; to the degree he is mastered by his tools, the shape of the tool determines his own self-image. (p. 22)

Looking around me in 1984—George Orwell’s year—I could see the truth of these words. Illich was right: human beings were remaking themselves in the image of the computer. People saw themselves, referred to themselves, as systems, or even as cybernetic organisms. Their senses provided “feedback.” Food and information were seen as “inputs” or as “system requirements.” Food labeling changed to reflect this: the old list of ingredients was expanded to include the list of “Nutrition Facts” we see today.

Temperamentally, I never much enjoyed driving and so never really wanted to own or depend on a car. But *Energy and Equity* opened my eyes to the ways in which cars—and other high-speed modes of transport—were truly debilitating, in every sense of that word.² And the essay illustrated the sense of limits mentioned above, in this case a speed limit, and how once these narrow limits were transgressed means turned into ends and frustrated the very purpose for which the tool was developed and adopted.

Such insights I might have obtained from reading, say, Jacques Ellul or Lewis Mumford. But Illich goes further by broadening the way he defines the word tool. For Illich, schools, hospitals, transportation systems, factories, and prisons are also tools. He writes,

I use the term because it allows me to subsume into one category all rationally designed devices, be they artifacts or rules, codes or operators, and to
distinguish all these planned and engineered instrumentalties from other things such as food or implements, which in a given culture are not deemed to be subject to rationalization. (p. 22)

From reading Illich's critique of tools (in this general sense), I began to see the extent to which modern society is all sewn up, so to speak. Genuinely human acts have more and more been replaced by the operation of machines, institutions, and systems. Everything—from procuring the food we eat to dealing with the excrement we leave behind, from birthing to dying, from healing to moving—has been designed, rationalized, engineered, all in the name of optimizing or improving on nature. That this engineering ethos had eclipsed and replaced our historical trust in and dependence on nature was the focus of the closing essay of Deschooling Society, "Rebirth of Epimethean Man."

To the primitive the world was governed by fate, fact and necessity. By stealing fire from the gods, Prometheus turned facts into problems, called necessity into question, and defied fate. Classical man framed a civilized context for human perspective. He was aware that he could defy fate-nature-environment, but only at his own risk. Contemporary man goes further; he attempts to create the world in his image, to build a totally man-made environment, and then discovers that he can do so only on the condition of constantly remaking himself to fit it. We must now face the fact that man himself is at stake.

Tools for Conviviality, perhaps more than Illich's other writings, describes the mess we're in. The chapter entitled "The Multiple Balance" outlines five ways in which life in modern industrial society is a life severely out of balance: despoliation of the physical environment, frustration of natural competences; education's triumph over learning; social and economic polarization, and engineered obsolescence. Illich remarked once that he suffered a sort of melancholia—a depression—in the midst of writing that section of the book. He saw that the growing consciousness about environmental degradation was but the tip of the iceberg, and that the various imbalances he outlined in the book were interrelated and mutually reinforcing. A piecemeal, one-dimensional solution would be an exercise in futility. "We must face the fact," he pointed out; "that the imbalance between man and the environment is just one of several mutually reinforcing stresses, each distorting the balance of life in a different dimension" (p. 53).

It could be argued that no scholar has pierced as sharply as Ivan Illich the depths to which we have fallen. Even the "soft energy" solutions of Amory Lovins (and others), which appear so promising to many environmentalists, are seen clearly by Illich to prop up some of the other imbalances. "Even clean and equally distributed electricity could lead to intolerable radical monopoly of power tools over man's personal energy" (p. 83). And in these days, the Internet, applauded
and championed by many “progressives” as a great democratizing force and organizing tool and as the answer to our quest for community, is recognized by Illich as the very opposite of personal relatedness, the opposite of true experience. Indeed, Illich’s friend and colleague, John McKnight, has dubbed the computer “the ultimately unconvivial tool.”

Yet, technological society marches on, and the dire warnings voiced by Illich twenty-five years ago remain largely unheeded. Was Illich wrong? Was he exaggerating the severity of the situation? No, I believe he saw things plainly and accurately. But he may have underestimated two aspects of people living in commodity-intensive, institution-permeated society:

- Belief in technology is our modern-day religion. People have a strong, almost unshakable faith that we can engineer our way out of any problems caused by previous technological/institutional solutions. “If we can send a man to the moon, then surely we can . . .”

- Addiction to comfort and labor-saving tools prevents people from choosing to pursue a more simple (though perhaps more labor-intensive) way of life. Most people do not want to give up their cars or televisions or high-tech medical procedures or curriculums or computers or fax machines or air conditioners, and so on, even when the harmful social, political, cultural, and environmental effects of these tools are pointed out to them.

The first entails the sin of hubris, of pride; the second, acedia, or sloth.

For the most part, Illich has refused to outline a political program or movement platform suggesting what “we” should do if “we” share his critique of industrial society. (And Illich is wary of the power and violence contained in that little word we.) It is for each person in his/her particular place, together with friends, neighbors, and family, to figure out what he/she should do. Illich has consistently rejected the role of leader or guru who tells people what to do. This, I feel, is the proper stance to take.

Yet I also feel there are ways to address the inner void some people experience after reading Illich’s devastating critique without saying, “Here’s what you should do.” I believe in the importance of stories such as those told by writer and poet Wendell Berry, both in his essays and in his fiction. He tells of people, both real and fictional, he “knows” in his hometown of Port Royal, Kentucky. These stories, such as the one he tells in the essay “Does Community Have a Value?,” speak volumes. Several of Illich’s close friends and colleagues are consummate storytellers: Lee Hoinacki, David Schwartz, John McKnight, Gustavo Esteva, to name a few. In person, Illich is a great storyteller, but not many of these stories have made it into his writing (with the exception of David Cayley’s book, Ivan Illich in Conversation). Such stories can kindle people’s imaginations for what it might be like to live “a life simple in means and rich in ends,” to use Cayley’s phrase. This is one way, I believe, that
Illich's insights might be advanced or extended, made more concrete and down-to-earth without becoming prescriptive.

**ILLICH'S CRITIQUE OF EDUCATION**

Aside from his critique of the medical profession, Illich is perhaps best known as the man who took on the school—indeed, the entire education establishment. But few readers have followed him beyond his early criticism of schooling, expressed in *Deschooling Society.* Indeed, the essays dealing with education that came after *Deschooling Society* ("In Lieu of Education," *Imprisoned in the Global Classroom,* "Taught Mother Tongue," "Eco-Pedagogics and the Commons," "A Plea for Research in Lay Literacy," "The Educational Sphere," "The Educational Enterprise in the Light of the Gospel," "The History of Homo Educandus") go much deeper and are far more radical than the original book. Even while the manuscript of *Deschooling* was still at the publishers, Illich grew increasingly dissatisfied with the text. Reflecting on the evolution of his thinking on the matter, Illich wrote much later:

I called for the disestablishment of schools for the sake of improving education and here, I noticed, lay my mistake. Much more important than the disestablishment of schools was the reversal of those trends making education a pressing need rather than a gift of gratuitous leisure. . . . The more important question became, "Why do so many people—even ardent critics of schooling—become addicted to education, as to a drug?"

He came to see that "the deschooling of our worldview demands that we recognize the illegitimate and religious nature of the educational enterprise itself. Its hubris lies in the attempt to make man a social being as a result of his treatment in an engineered process."

Thus, after *Deschooling Society,* Illich came to question not only schooling but the very idea of education itself. His plea for research not in but on education, and for research into the history and origins of *homo educandus* (that species of human born in need of education), was an attempt to invite others to examine something he had noticed; namely, that *education,* as we define the term today, is a rather recent invention, not much more than four hundred years old. It is not something endemic to the human condition but took form gradually within a certain social milieu and a particular mental topology. More recently, Illich has remarked that this very topology is undergoing a major transformation under the shadow of cybernetic, information technology. *Homo educandus* is itself becoming an endangered species, rapidly being replaced by *homo programmendus* (that species of human born in need of programming, of integration into the cybernetic system and world of virtual realities).

This type of analysis—a move from institutional critique to an investigation of the social and intellectual history that gave rise to the institution in the first place—marked a change in Illich's approach that appeared in the late 1970s or early 1980s, although...
time Shadow Work came out. Illich spent the preceding years carefully describing the mess we're in. But he became more and more curious about how we got into this mess. This led him to a historical investigation of what he calls "modern certainties," the "epoch-specific apriorisms which generate not only our mental conceptions but also our sensual perceptions and the feelings in our hearts about what constitutes social reality." That people need education or need to go through a process of socialization if they are to grow up properly are two examples of such certainties, as is the very notion that people have "needs" at all. But in Shadow Work, and later in Gender, Illich zeroed in on what is perhaps the root certainty of our time: the assumption of scarcity.

Illich came to define the modern notion of education as "learning under the assumption of scarcity," that is, that the means for learning in general are in scarce supply. This assumption of scarcity causes people to create social mechanisms— institutions—to try to ensure that others learn certain things, or feel safe, or have a roof over their heads and enough food to eat, be cared for when they get sick, and so on. As Illich explained in Tools for Conviviality, Energy and Equity, and Medical Nemesis, such interventions can be helpful, up to a certain point, but they soon grow in size and intensity such that they turn means into ends and conclude frustrating the very purposes for which they were created. "Paradoxical counterproductivity," as Illich calls it, sets in.

More personally, Illich's critique of education enabled me to look upon the "Growing without Schooling" movement, with which I became acquainted through John Holt's friendship, with new, more exacting eyes. Many of the families who started this movement in the late 1970s were influenced by Illich's early analysis of schooling, amplified and expanded by John Holt in his later books. But most of these families, who themselves make up a small portion of the larger homeschooling movement, are true believers in education, socialization, and child development. They go to great lengths to provide materials, resources, opportunities, apprenticeships, internships, and the like, all for the sake of their children's educations. Illich enabled me to see how such activities, undertaken with the best of intentions, can end up anchoring the myth of education to an even greater extent than schools do. He also enabled me to see how education is the generator or, more precisely, in automotive terms, the alternator of modern industrial society, keeping its scarcity-batteries charged through its own motions and operation. This dynamic often remains completely untouched under the rubric of homeschooling, free schooling, deschooling or what have you. And the more mainstream homeschooling becomes, the more diluted its revolutionary potential will be. Paradoxical counterproductivity strikes again!

ILLICH ON FRIENDSHIP, HOPE, AND HOSPITALITY

What, then, is the alternative to the assumption of scarcity? I believe the answer is trust and faith in the goodness, the rightness, of nature—some would say, of God. Illich draws a distinction between the pre-scarcity notion of hope and the post-scarcity concept of expectation. He writes,
Hope, in its strong sense, means trusting faith in the goodness of nature, while expectation, as I will use it here, means reliance on results which are planned and controlled by man. Hope centers on a person from whom we await a gift. Expectation looks forward to satisfaction from a predictable process which will produce what we have the right to claim.  

_Hope centers on a person._ If there is anything left of hope in this crumbling, decaying society, it is through the disciplined practice of friendship in the old sense of the term, in the rabbinic or monastic sense, in the sense of being fully there for that other person. Today, friendship typically means getting together with selected others over a game of tennis or golf, gabbing on the phone, sending personal e-mail updates, or perhaps going to the movies or a restaurant. But Illich goes back to Plato, and especially to the parable of the Good Samaritan, to rediscover what friendship and hospitality have meant throughout the ages. For Plato, the self has meaning only in the eye of the other. We gain ourselves as a gift from the other and the contents of that gift is all we have meant, given, and offered to that other person. The gift will be only as beautiful as the extent to which we have loved, have practiced _charitas_, toward that other. And just who is that other? Who is my neighbor whom I am enjoined to love? The message of the Samaritan story, according to Illich, is that I must decide whom I will take into my arms, whom I will care for and love in this way, whom I will invite over my threshold.

Why this emphasis on friendship? If society is marching off in the wrong direction (or perhaps the more accurate image is that of lemmings running toward a cliff), would not the correct response be to try to reverse the direction by working to form a massive political movement? Illich seems to answer this question in the negative. Though he stops short of condemning anyone who seeks to enter politics to try to bring about major social change, it is clear that he himself is quite wary of what passes for politics in this day and age. In the age of mass media, sound bites, and spin doctors, politics is invariably about popularity contests, image, money, and power. Political debates have devolved into sporting events—boxing matches, really—with the spectators and political commentators eager to see who will deliver the knockout punch. Even local politics has been corrupted in this way. It is extremely difficult for even grassroots movements to resist cooptation and corruption by powerful media. According to Illich, the only space left is in our friendships, “disciplined, self-denying, careful, tasteful friendships. Mutual friendships always—I and you and, I hope, a third person—out of which perhaps community can grow. Because perhaps here we can find out what the good is.” And in such friendships, I would add, friends can support one another in the cheerful, disciplined renunciation of those things that impinge on the good, on our relatedness to each other, on community—that is, those things to which we must say a loud, clear, “No!”

As David Schwartz, John McKnight, and others have pointed out, there are remnants of this older, deeper meaning of friendship extant today, even in the bowels of technological society—though one has to look carefully to see them. They exist
only in the cracks and crevices of modernity, for modern society militates against true friendship. The economy controls our lives and forces us to compete against our neighbors; it forces us to view ourselves as separate, independent moneymaking atoms. Increasingly, screens, loudspeakers, and the metallic shell of the automobile separate us from others. Institutions and professionals have taken over the work of caring for people which, they tell us, they can do better than we can, but which they can only do by debasing care and love. Still, in times of crisis, that which makes us human often rises to the surface. Sometimes it takes an earthquake, a tornado, a flood, war, severe illness, or some other catastrophe to bring it out, for people to act as true neighbors. That is, when the systems and institutions break down during a calamity, Samaritan impulses are awakened. But as soon as the caring machines and other social mechanisms are repaired, people revert to their normal uncaring ways.

It is hard to imagine getting to a place where this sort of Samaritan behavior is the norm rather than the exception. But one must be careful here to avoid succumbing to the megalomaniacal fantasies of the engineering ethos: thinking one can shape society toward a given end, however attractive that end may seem. If I am to avoid hubris, I must admit that all I can really control is my own behavior. Otherwise I run the risk of becoming an educator—that is, a people-shaper—myself. So what do I do? I try to be as good a friend as I can. This means living for others and, in Mohandas Gandhi's words, "reducing oneself to zero." My friends know that I will do almost anything for them, and I try to take that Samaritan story into my heart and be a true neighbor. I can only hope that such behavior is somehow infectious. Every time I give a hungry or homeless person a bowl of soup and a piece of bread, I think of myself as planting a seed both in the heart of the person receiving the gift of food and in the passerby who might take note of what I am doing. Whether either of those two seeds germinates and grows is, of course, not up to me. But I can harbor hope that they will.

Similarly, to have a trusting faith in nature—including human nature—is the opposite of education, for it is in the very being of the human animal to learn. From Ivan Illich I have come to know that to love a child (or for that matter, a person of any age) means not to mold him or her according to my expectations, but to have hope and trust in that person, to look deeply into his or her eyes, listen with full presence to her or his voice to find out who that person is, then accept that person for who he or she is, saying: "I am here for you."

Hope means trusting faith in the goodness of nature. The belief that we can outdo nature; overcome it, and improve on it, underlies what has been called the "technological project" that marks our era. Lack of faith in nature (again, including human nature) creates the assumption of scarcity—nature isn't good enough, won't provide enough, can't be relied on, and so on—and I've already discussed where that road leads: right into the mess we're in. No summation of technological fixes will get us out of it; on the contrary, it will only get us in an even deeper mess. The only way out, if there is a way out, is to abandon the technological project, and identify the Ameri-
back, it seems as if I've come a long way—but it is quite short indeed compared to the
distance I have yet to travel. And it is no easy thing to swim against the tide of moder-
nity. But Illich's alarm is still sounding, and though I hope we will see the error of
our ways, I do not expect we will find our passage out of the mess we're in. As far as I
can see, virtually all of the trends seem to be going in the wrong direction.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

NOTES

1. Here and following, whenever a page reference appears in parentheses in the text,
4. Personal conversation. See also the discussion with Illich on “The Politics of Friend-
6. See David Cayley, Part Moon, Part Travelling Salesman: Conversations with Ivan Illich,
7. Wendell Berry, “Does Community Have A Value?” in his Home Economics (San
9. Ibid., p. 17.
10. In fact, the main thrust of Deschooling Society lies not in its critique of schools but, as
mentioned earlier, in schooling and institutionalization as indicators of the corruption of the
human spirit.
11. “In Lieu of Education,” in Ivan Illich, Toward a History of Needs (Berkeley, CA: Hey-
day Books, 1978); Ivan Illich and Etienne Verne, Imprisoned in the Global Classroom (New York:
Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, 1976); “Taught Mother Tongue,” “The Educa-
tional Sphere,” “The History of Homo Educand us,” and “A Plea for Research on Lay Literacy,”
in Ivan Illich, In the Mirror of the Past: Lectures and Addresses 1978-1990 (London: Marion
Boyars, 1992); “Eco-Pedagogics and the Commons,” unpublished manuscript, 1983; and “The
12. Ivan Illich, “Foreword” in Deschooling Our Lives, ed. Matt Hern (Gabriola Island,
13. Illich, “In Lieu of Education.” Very few people indeed realize that this critique
plies to Illich’s own proposals of “learning webs” at the end of Deschooling Society—proposals
Illich rejects today.
16. Ivan Illich, Gender (New York: Pantheon, 1982).
17. Ibid., in the Mirror of the Past, p. 165.
18. Illich, Gender, p. 15.
19. The extent is greater because such interventions, done for education's sake, are
different than their institutional counterparts, and they are also deemed to be "effective.
20. Illich, Deschooling Society, pp. 151-152.
23. Other influences have been Wally and Juanita Nelson; Wendell Berry; Lee Hoinacki; John Holt; Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day, and Ammon Hennacy (of the Catholic Worker); Mohandas Gandhi; Helen and Scott Nearing; Randy Kehler and Betsy Corner; Eric Weinberger; and my soul mate, Susannah Sheffer.