IVAN: "IN BOOK AFTER BOOK..." (AS PROMISED)*

by Bill Arney

On the outskirts of Havana, they call friends mi tiera, my country, or mi sangre, my blood. In Caracas, a friend is mi pana, my bread, or mi llave, my key: pana from panadería, bakery, the source of wholesome bread to sate the hunger of the soul; llave from... "Key, from key," Mario Benedetti tells me.
And he tells me how, when he lived in Buenos Aires in times of terror, he would carry five alternate keys on this key ring: the keys to five houses, to five friends: the keys that proved his salvation.

Eduardo Galeano
The Book of Embraces

There is a sense in which I have known the work of Ivan Illich for more than fifteen years. There is another sense in which I have known his work only since beginning to know him, something that happened only two years ago. My topic is the work of Ivan Illich as I know it.

Bob Kugelmann says that the making of lists is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. You know the kind of list he has in mind. Item #1: "Make a List." Item #2: "Grocery Shopping (See attached List)" Item #3: "Study (See reading list)." Bob has written about these lists in his book on the history of stress.[1] Stress is a modern phenomenon, too coming out of the "strain" of the 19th century and out of "grief" and "loss" before that. In times of stress, make a list. Prioritize and get

* A lecture at The Evergreen State College, January, 1992. This piece was prepared for inclusion in a Uniqat, a book published in an edition of one and presented to Ivan Illich on the occasion of his 65th birthday. The title refers to an exchange we had after Illich began a foreword to one of my books with "In book after book…." When I read that I told Illich that someday I would feel prepared to say what I had learned from him "in book after book."

1 Kugelmann, Robert, Stress: The Nature and History of Engineered Grief, New York: Praeger, 1992.

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started, the therapists tell us. Just make a list and check things off as you go. By your check-marks of accomplishment will you be known.

There is another kind of list. A friend in New Hampshire has a daughter who, just as she was learning to talk, would wake up each morning and recite the list of all the words she knew. "Mama, No, Dog, Eat, It, Me...." The list grew longer as she grew older. Every morning, she would read all the words from memory. Eventually, I imagine, she developed a sense of security about the fact that this list of words by which she was known and by which she made herself known in the world would not be lost to her because of a night's sleep. She eventually stopped rehearsing her list every morning. But I dare say she keeps that list, which grows longer still, with her even now.

Illich concludes his lecture, "The Educational Enterprise in the Light of the Gospel," his call for paying attention to dropouts, with a plea for the construction of lists.

> None of [the educational research money in the U.S.] is focused on the transformation of the status of the dropout from that of an escapee who must be caught and brought back into the fold into that of a world wise, reasonable person. I do not plead for some new form of institutionalized haven. Rather I think of niches, free spaces, squatters arrangements, spiritual tents which some of us might be able to offer, not for "the dropout in general" but each of us for a small "list" of others, who through the experience of mutual obedience have become able to renounce integration into the "system."[2]

2 Illich, Ivan, "The Educational Enterprise in Light of the Gospel," Lecture Notes, Chicago, Ill., November 13, 1988, pp. 30-31.

This small "list" of others is not the to-do list of the stressed-out person suffering her losses under a regime of what Kugelmann calls "engineered grief" and who is trying desperately, with a little organization and a little perseverance, just to keep less far behind than yesterday. This is not the list of the roll call with its implied or explicit list of "individual needs" to which the teacher can respond through the mobilization of resources. Illich's small list of others is more like Jennifer's morning recital of her words. It is a list of other people through which, via the intimacy of "mutual obedience," one is known and makes oneself known in the world.

The creation of this kind of list has one possible (but certainly not necessary) outcome: enabling oneself and others "to renounce integration into the 'system.'" For many years Illich and a list of associates have undertaken what they call "an archeology of modern certainties." This involves a particular kind of historical inquiry into those terms that we all take for granted, terms and practices that we think give orientation to life and living. For example, Barbara Duden's has inquired into the appearance of that modern thing—the "fetus"—in the place previously occupied by the *nondum*, the "not yet" in a "woman's innards."[3] Illich has been interested in the appearance of the notion of "life." He, like Foucault, has studied the appearance of "sex" on the recent historical scene. Other associates have undertaken studies of "progress," "helping," "development," and so on.[4] Illich has either discovered or invented (the distinction is not, I think, of great importance here) something called "gender" and "gendered society" to demonstrate that this modern given, sex (a variable characteristic of a similarly recent thing, the "human being") is

3 Duden, Barbara, Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993.

4 Sachs, Wolfgang, ed., The Development Dictionary, London: Zed Books, 1992

historically and culturally contingent. The list of the modern certainties with which Illich has concerned himself is much longer. What I am concerned with today is not the items on that list but rather Illich's attitude toward them. We must, he says, say a firm and resolute "no" to these modern certainties in order to avoid integration into the "system."

At first glance there seems a parallel between Illich and Foucault on this matter of saying "no." (There is not a parallel between either of these guys and Nancy Reagan's "just say no.") Foucault, in his "Preface to Transgression,"[5] says something like, "Use
the positive voice to say 'no.'" Boundaries must be breached and limits transgressed to affirm something like the limitlessness of life together, he seems to say. Illich's "no" is not the same sort of "no." It is a complementary form of "no." The comparison is worth attention.

Foucault's histories are of the social, one might even say artificial, placement of boundaries in social life. His first studies were of the boundaries between the mad and the sane and the diseased and the well. Later he became interested in the normal and in the processes of normalization in which boundaries are seemingly fluid and have the capacity to capture everything under a regime of "discipline." But still there was the implied boundary of the "system," the boundary of the prison wall, the boundary of the social within which everyone was a delinquent, "at risk" and all those other terms that the Normal inflicts on us. These are the boundaries that must, he says, be transgressed (in the name of nothing).

Illich is interested in the ways in which things—social institutions in particular, tools in general— grow in utility

5 Foucault, Michel, "A preface to transgression," pp. 29-52 in Donald F. Bouchard, ed., Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977

beyond their own limits. In medicine he would be interested in the way limited knowledge of the uses of a few plants or a few techniques by a few people has grown into the modern world's principal industry and has claimed, in the name of health and wellness, authority for the management of living. In education, he has been interested in the way the experience of an orientation he calls "bookishness" has grown into the business of compulsory, age graded, universal ... and so on, stuff we call "schooling." For Illich, the threat to good living comes not from teaching and learning per se or from efforts to help people in times of illness per se; the threat comes from the expansiveness of the institutionalized forms of these activities, from the way that there is seemingly no way to live unless one submits to the "system" or becomes a good and faithful critic of the "system."

So Illich says "no." No, I do not want to accept the generous offers of systematized help. And equally forcefully, no, I do not want to debate how to make systematized help better, regardless of what criterion happens to be the reigning measure of "better" at the time. By saying "no" in this doubled form one does not transcend limits; instead, one is able "to renounce integration into the 'system,'" the system that is based on the grounding concept of "needs."

Most of Illich's analyses proceed from a concern with the assertion and imputation of "human needs." Most institutions come into being through their ability to assert that people have needs: the need for health, the need for certified knowledge, etc. It just so happens—historically it happens—that the institutions that name your needs are the institutions that say they are able to meet those needs. But, historically and empirically, institutions have a "specific (or paradoxical) counterproductivity" that leads them to effect the opposite of what they claim they will do. Medicine causes not ease from illness but dis-ease. (He said medicine is "iatrogenic.") School-

ing causes a peculiar kind of illiteracy. This sets up the sort of social dynamic that Foucault outlined with prisons, viz., institutions bring with them their own impulse for (and, indeed, their own rhetoric of) reform. What Illich and Foucault both recognize is that the proponents and the reformer-opponents of social institutions both accept the underlying premise that there is a human need that must be met. The only question—the thing that separates proponent and opponent—is how to meet those needs. So Illich's "no" is directed more against the foundational notion of "need" than it is against the institutions that presume to meet those needs.

Of course, in these times, this can be a silly kind of posture to adopt. A gentle critic might ask, "Are you saying, Professor Illich, that the human body does not have a need for a certain number of calories to keep going?" or, "Don't you think that children need some knowledge?" Instead of saying what his understandings might lead him to say (viz., "I would prefer not to think thoughtlessly about a person having a 'human body' that can be conceived as an energetic device," or "I don't think it's good that we have turned a certain portion of our number into 'children.'"), he just says "no" to such invitational questions. He renounces the questions themselves and thereby renounces integration into the system.

Marianne Gronemeyer has written a book called *The Power of Needs*.[6] In it she writes about the power institutions come to have in our lives if we accept the premise that humans are need-full beings. She finds an opposition to this power not in power of another sort: the power of reason, the power of historical contradictions, the power of well-assembled critical groups, etc., pick one depending on your theory of social change. She finds opposition to this form of power in *Ohn-*

6 Gronemeyer, Marianne, Die Macht der Berdürfnesse: Reflexion über ein Phantom rowohat, Verlag Reinbeck, 1988.

macht, a German word that has two meanings: powerlessness and fainting. To oppose the power of needs one must accept one's total powerlessness. One must faint away[7] in the face of the reasonable demand that one enter into the dominant discourse, either as an advocate or as a member of the loyal opposition.

Illich's "no" is, for me, not a protest against or even a critical attack on modern institutions in the usual sense. His "no" is more a protest against the presumed adequacy of human knowledge. His attack is on the *presumptuousness* of knowledge and understanding, and, drawing on what I said before about limits, on the seeming limitlessness of our presumptuousness. He is opposed to the presumed elimination, through the operations of reason, of mystery from life. Not, I am quick to add, the "mystery" of which Joseph Campbell speaks, which is an excuse for not pursuing knowledge of anything, but the mystery one encounters at the end of a life of loving struggle to know something. This is part of the reason, I think, Illich has started writing not as a theologian, as he cautiously insists, but in a more explicitly theologically in-

7 Lenny Bruce: "I'm doing a new bit that you'll just flip out with. It's social commentary. I do it with a colored guitarist, Eric Miller. The bit is on integration.
"So anyway, we do the bit together. Halfway through the bit—there is this party of four to my right, and they're really bugging me, you know, saying, 'I don't unnerstan it.'
"So I give this woman a quick stab: 'You schlub, you wouldn't understand anything'—you know.
"The other guy says, 'What'd he say to her?'
"The other guy says, 'He said something dirty in Jewish.'
"So I said, 'There is nothing dirty in Jewish.'
"So dig, she takes this old-fashioned glass, and starts winging it, man vvvooom! Right past me, man. I'm shocked. It crashes behind me.
"So I say, 'You've got a bad sense of humor, and bad aim.'
"So she gets bugged again, throws a second glass.
"I said, 'Well, assuming I'm the most vulgar, irreverent comedian you've ever seen, you've capped it with violence. You realize what a terrible thing—you threw a glass at me!'
"So dig what the husband says: 'What else would a lady have done?'
"I said, 'Faint!'"
(From Cohen, John, ed., The Essential Lenny Bruce, New York, N.Y.: Random House, 1967, pp. 116-117.)

formed language. In his call for a new askesis in *higher education*, I hear Illich opposing not the search for knowledge and the love of wisdom, but I hear him opposing the posturing that results from the assumption that the proper way to know and be known in the world is to involve oneself in the plays of power that develop around knowledge. I hear in this a call to accept the posturelessness of one who has fainted away in embracing one's powerlessness.

Illich's inquiry into our modern condition, an inquiry marked by his insistent "no," is entirely negative. Erich Fromm called his approach "radical doubt." Illich's criticisms are pointed and harsh if also rigorously empirical. But they are not intended to be productive. They do not point toward a better future In Gender, what he calls his first "book," Illich shows why it is important for him not to be interested in even the causes of our current situation. He writes,

> In this essay I have not tried to explain why society places the man on top and the handicap on the woman. *I have controlled my curiosity* [gloss: he has resisted the temptation to the possible limitlessness of this inquiry] in order to be free to listen more attentively to the report of the losers, to learn not about them but about the battlefield that is the economy.[8]

You must say "no" even to the general mode of inquiry that seeks causes for each obvious effect so that you do not develop a prurient interest in the situation of others whom you cannot know. You have to say "no" to the all-too-easy business of turning the subjects of history into objects of inquiry. Why? So that you stand a slight chance of developing an understanding of things as they have come to be.

8 Illich, Ivan, Gender, New York, N.Y.: Pantheon, 1982, p. 178, emphasis added.

After that, after renouncing an interest in the dominant mode of inquiry, you also have to renounce the kind of interest in the future that is a commonplace of what passes for politics today but which is a kind of an interest in the future that is allowed to only a privileged few. *Gender* begins to end with this,

> I have no strategy to offer. I refuse to speculate on the probabilities of any cure. I shall not allow the shadow of the future to fall on the concepts with which I try to grasp what is and what has been.[9]

Illich's work is a thorough-going critique of the modern condition. And somewhat like Foucault, he refuses to go farther than the present. He refuses to suggest some presumed grand plan which might attract disciples and foundation grants and which might lead to the formation of utopian communities composed of nothing but the blind.

Indeed, the only interest I can find in Illich's work is an interest in having eyes open. He writes in the introduction to the lecture on education, "I will argue that—in this instance—the Gospel sharpens our eyes for the perception of the obvious, which our schooled minds cannot admit."[10] His work is a kind of invitation to look and see, a "celebration of awareness." [11] His readers are invited to see not through his eyes and certainly not through the theory-bound eyes of the well-schooled, but through their own eyes, using whatever devices help sharpen their own visions of things as they are. We are back to a Lenny Bruce-like notion that people ought

9 Ibid., p. 179.

10 Illich, "The Educational Enterprise," op. cit., p. 1.

11 Illich, Ivan, Celebration of Awareness, Berkeley, Calif.: Heyday Books, 1969.

to be taught what is, not what should be. And to show what a thing is in these well-schooled times, when everyone knows what everything is truly *and* has an opinion about it, you have to proceed negatively.

Sometimes when the nature of a thing is so obvious and yet there are so many competing well-schooled visions of what a thing could be if it were better fitted for life, you have to proceed by showing people what a thing is not. So, schooling is *not* about transmission of knowledge. Medicine is *not* about healing the sick. Because he is interested not in reform but in making a way for people to seize a good life lived well together, Illich tries to dismantle the visions that support social institutions that erode and undermine the possibility of living well.

Illich proceeds down his negative way with only one thing that some might consider positive. He has hope. *Gender* ends, "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."[12] Josef Pieper says hope, in the tradition from which Illich writes,

> is the condition of man's existence as a knowing subject, a condition that by its very nature cannot be fixed: it is neither comprehension and possession nor simply non-possession, but "not-yet-possession." [This construction recalls Duden's nondum, her "not-yet."] The knowing subject is visualized as a traveller, a viator, as someone "on the way." This means, from one point of view, that the steps he takes have significance, that they are not altogether in vain, and that they bring him nearer his goal. Yet this thought has to be complemented by another: as long as man as "existing being" is "on the way," just so

12 Illich, Gender, op. cit., p. 179.

> long is the "way" of his knowing uncompleted.[13]

Through his constant critiques, Illich offers no vision, no ideas for renewal, no scheme for reform. He offers only the hope of the not-yet.

With what are we left in this condition of the not-yet, in this condition of hope? We are left with our lists. One might be a person left with the list of the sort Kugelmann writes about. In the face of the not-yet, there are things to do. Just list them and get them done. The not-yet may remain, still, the not-yet, but at least you will have a sense of accomplishment. One might, alternatively, be a person with the sort of list Illich writes about, a small list of others with whom you live in relationships of mutual obedience. It is worth reminding ourselves what Illich means by "obedience":

> unobstructed listening, unconditional readiness to hear, untrammeled disposition to be surprised by the Other's word… When I listen unconditionally, respectfully, courageously with the readiness to take in the other as a radical surprise…I bow, bend over towards the total otherness of someone. But I renounce the searching for bridges between the other and me, recognizing that a gulf separates us. Leaning into this chasm makes me aware of the depth of my loneliness and able to bear it in light of the substantial likeness between the other and myself. All that reaches me is the other in his word, which I accept on faith.[14]

13 Pieper, Josef, The Silence of St. Thomas: Three Essays, New York, N.Y.: Pantheon, 1957, pp. 69-70.

14 Illich, "The Educational Enterprise," op. cit., pp. 18-19.

I once learned that Illich's notion of a list has a material manifestation in his life. He has a list of several hundred names he carries with him all the time. When he writes something, he sends it to some of the people on this list. They listen. When someone on the list calls on him or writes, he listens in order to give a conscientious response. It is through this list of people he knows—and not through, for example, his list of books—that Illich knows himself and is known.

Now I will make what may seem a rather sudden turn. I want to turn away from the nature of the lists by which one is known and ask, finally, what it is that is obvious once our eyes are sharpened and opened and able to see? To do this, I must turn toward one interpretation of the work of a man Allan Nasser calls one of the three greatest philosophers in history. I look to the work and the life of Thomas Aquinas, acknowledging that Illich works in this tradition of a Christian appropriation of Aristotelian thinking. A colleague says that, out of the boredom of her schooling, she was moved to read all of Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. This is something that no one can do, of course, because Thomas's *Summa* is incomplete. Several months before he died, Thomas suddenly stopped writing his great work. He told his assistant, "Reginald, I can write no more. All that I have written before seems to me nothing but straw." Thomas spent the last months of his life almost totally in silence. He broke this silence once, to speak to an order on "The Song of Songs," that book of the Bible that recounts the sensuousness of embodied love. It was a fitting last talk for a man who knew it was impossible to separate the love of truth from the love of other human beings.[15]

When I look into Illich's writings to find the "obvious" for which the perception of our eyes is to be sharpened, it seems, at first, obvious that we no longer live with Aquinas' conviction. It seems obvious, today, that a lover of truth need

15 After Pieper, op. cit.

not make any declarations about his relationship to any other human being. It seems obvious that the love of one's fellows is something conducted on a different plane from the love of truth. But then it appears equally "obvious" that right there, in Ivan's work, in book after book, there is an invitation to make the connection again and again, all the time, everywhere. The loving search for the truth is inseparable from the search for loving friends. Illich writes his critiques of our modern condition, yes, but he also has his list, his list that embodies and enfleshes his hope. The two are obviously connected. But Illich never makes the connection. He never writes about it; he never speaks about it. But if something is obvious, I suppose you don't have to say anything. We know that at least one of the great philosophers fell silent when everything became obvious to him.