

# Introduction

## Ivan Illich as I Knew Him

“Call me Ivan,” said the gaunt, hawk-nosed man, as he extended his hand to those who had come to join us for dinner at our downtown Toronto commune in the fall of 1970. He indicated the correct Slavic pronunciation—*Ěvān*—rather than the English version of his name, by which we had come to know him. There were no chairs in the room where we were eating, just mattresses covered with Indian bedspreads. The deep-blue walls were decorated with posters from the Russian and Cuban revolutions. But our guest seemed right at home, hunkered down with us on the floor. He had come to Toronto to address a teach-in called “Crisis in Development” that a group of us had organized, and later that evening we would have to turn people away from the 600-seat auditorium we had booked for the occasion.

Ivan Illich was then on the cusp of a period of worldwide celebrity. The two books he had published that year—*Celebration of Awareness* and *The Church, Change and Development*—were already being widely read and reviewed, his ideas were discussed at dinner parties, and his lectures, as we learned, were mobbed. These were what he called his “campaigning” years. Ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1950, he soon became an advocate of “a new Church” and a radical critic of the existing institution, which he put “on a par with the General Motors Company and the Chase Manhattan Bank”—“a giant,” he wrote, “that begins to totter before it collapses.” In the 1960s, he became an opponent of most American missionary activities in Latin America, arguing that what was being called “mission” had more to do with exporting dysfunctional institutions and shoring up a church fatally allied with corrupt political establishments than it did with preaching the Gospel. These efforts antagonized powerful elements in the Church, and, in 1968, he was subjected to formal inquisition in Rome. The following year the Vatican put a ban on the Center for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC), the institute that he then

directed in Mexico. Illich reluctantly withdrew from Church service and turned his full attention to those modern institutions, like education, medicine, and law, that he believed were directly descended from the Church. The modern world, he said, had reached its last ditch and was facing a now-or-never moment, a final chance to set firm limits to technological and institutional overreach.

Seizing the opportunity created by his fame, he crisscrossed the world like a jet-age St. Paul, spreading his gospel of degrowth and *conviviality*, the name he gave to that spirit of celebration within defined horizons that he wanted to foster. *Celebration of Awareness*, *The Church, Change and Development*, *Deschooling Society*, *Energy and Equity*, *Tools for Conviviality*, and *Medical Nemesis*, the books he published between 1970 and 1975, all warned of a world on the edge of an abyss and about to descend into terminal “counter-productivity.” By this he meant two things. The first was that contemporary institutions were on the brink of becoming so big, so presumptuous, and so total that they would begin to get in their own way and defeat their originally more limited purposes. The second was that elementary human actions—learning, loving, healing, mourning, dying—were increasingly being brought under professional tutelage and even replaced altogether by more expertly designed versions. Without degrowth, de-professionalization, and a rebalancing of existence, he argued in these books, humankind would soon “find [itself] totally enclosed within [its] own artificial creation with no exit . . . a prisoner in the shell of technology.”

I had become aware of Illich in the summer of 1968, when I read a talk he gave that year in Chicago to a group of young American Catholics about to offer their services to Mexico as “volunteers” in development. Illich praised their spirit but questioned their motives. In what way, he asked, could unformed, unskilled young Americans “help” Mexicans, except as “demonstration models for high service consumption”? At the time, I had just returned from two years in the eastern Malaysian state of Sarawak, in northern Borneo, where I had been a volunteer teacher in a Chinese middle school. The experience had unsettled me and raised large questions about the international development crusade in which I had, if only half-consciously, enrolled when I joined the Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO), the agency that had sent me to Sarawak. Illich’s talk addressed these questions with impressive cogency and conviction but also spoke to me in some deeper, more heartfelt way. Along with other critically minded “returned volunteers,” I began to question the certainties underlying international development. When we were ready to present our teach-in on the subject, Illich was the man we most wanted as our keynote speaker, and that was how he came to be eating dinner in our commune in the fall of 1970.

Except for a brief encounter in Vancouver in 1975, when Illich lectured on his book *Medical Nemesis*, I did not see him again for seventeen years. I continued to read each new book of his with keen interest, but our paths didn't cross again until he appeared at a conference on Orality and Literacy that was held at the University of Toronto in June 1987. Illich was about to publish, with Barry Sanders, a book called *ABC: The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind*, a study that ranged over changing styles of literacy—from the introduction of the alphabet in ancient Greece to modern information technologies. By then, I had been, for many years, a broadcaster and was covering the conference for *Ideas*, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio series where I worked for many years. One of the things that had drawn me to this conference was the hope of reconnecting with Illich. I intended, by agreement with the organizers of the conference, to report on the proceedings by recording short interviews with the participants. With that end in view, I approached Illich in the lobby of his hotel. He told me emphatically that he had, for years, refused all interviews and would do one with me only reluctantly and as a courtesy to his hosts. We recorded the interview. I tested my recorder before beginning and monitored its display meter while we spoke, but when I later tried to play it back, I found nothing on the tape. Embarrassed, I approached Illich again. He intimated that he had hexed the recording. I had no other explanation, and his magus-like appearance lent his account a certain plausibility, but I had a job to do, and so for the next two days I doggedly pursued him until he finally consented to do a second interview. During this conversation, a rapport began to develop, and I plucked up enough courage to present him with a plan I had been incubating to do a radio series about him. However, despite the friendlier atmosphere and his obvious interest at learning that my three younger children were, at that point, unschooled, he still insisted that a long interview between us was quite out of the question.

When the conference concluded on Sunday afternoon, some of the participants lingered in the sunshine outside Emmanuel College, where we had been meeting. My wife, Jutta, and our three children arrived to meet me. I introduced them to Illich, and then, before we parted, he told me that I might, if I liked, send my proposal to interview him to his colleague Wolfgang Sachs. Several months later I received a short, carelessly typed letter from Illich, saying that I was welcome to come to State College, Pennsylvania, the home of Penn State University, where he was then giving a course of lectures during the fall semester. He promised, mysteriously, his “obedience.”

The following year, I drove to State College from my home in Toronto. When I arrived, I checked in at the Hotel State College, which Illich had described to

me over the phone as an establishment of “Franciscan simplicity.” I had imagined cloistered courtyards and cowled monks in rope-cinched habits. In fact, as the price should have indicated, I found myself in a threadbare room, directly above the town’s main intersection, where, later, a riotous victory celebration by fans of the vaunted Penn State football team kept me awake for most of the night. The next day I moved to a different hotel.

I found Illich in the middle of what he called a “living room consultation,” a small gathering in which food, drink, and friendship were the setting for intellectual interchange. Illich taught, on and off, at universities for much of his life, but he generally camped at their margins, refusing any regular appointment and, as he said, “soberly milking that sacred cow” in order to support the more intimate and convivial academic style that he preferred. The meeting then in progress was called “After Development, What?” It was one of a series of discussions that would lead to the publication a few years later of *The Development Dictionary*, a set of articles on key concepts of “the age of development” that were intended to mark, and hasten, its passing. I set up my tape recorder and microphones in Illich’s room, and he withdrew from the discussions downstairs once or twice a day so that we could talk. We sat on the floor with a low table between us, the situation in which he was most comfortable, and continued in that way for eight days. Slowly I began to understand the nature of the obedience he had offered me in his letter. Clearly it did not mean meekly following my instructions. He often took my questions to destinations I had not foreseen and, at one point, punctured my dignity by referring to my recorder as a “keyhole” before which we were exhibiting ourselves to strangers. But it did involve an extraordinarily alert and responsive attention and presence. Seeing me with my family outside Emmanuel College, he later told me, he had sensed something that made him turn toward me. And, in turning to face me, he opened himself to whatever adventure might follow. This reflected what he called his “hope of . . . being surprised” and the lifelong willingness to follow sudden inspirations that this hope encouraged. Once the door was open, it stayed open, and he gave himself to the situation I created with my microphones and my dogged, carefully premeditated questions in a way that seemed at once openhearted and critical. Often his answers surprised both of us.

The interview that we recorded in the fall of 1988 became, first, a five-hour radio series called “Part Moon, Part Travelling Salesman: Conversations with Ivan Illich,” which was broadcast on *Ideas* the following year. (The image, in the title, occurs in a poem by Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro. Illich thought it caught, quite precisely, the strangeness of his situation as, on the one hand, a man sustained

by Christian faith—a faith as mysterious to most of his contemporaries as the moon—and, on the other hand, a “pamphleteer,” as he called himself, shilling for social reform in the marketplace of ideas.) These conversations showed a different character than Illich had revealed in his more formal, and sometimes more forbidding, books. Occasional rebukes to my vanity and journalistic pretensions notwithstanding, the spoken Illich was friendlier, more confiding, and more inviting than the exacting and rhetorically compact writer. Lee Hoinacki, who had been Illich’s friend, collaborator, and confidant for thirty years, immediately perceived this difference and wrote to me asking if he could have the unedited tapes of the entire conversation. Hoinacki’s seraphic smile and straightforward manner had eased my way into the Illich milieu the year before, and I sent them off at once. Some months later, I got back a complete and careful transcription and the suggestion, from Hoinacki, that it be published. He had written an introduction in which he explained that Illich’s “inner biography,” as it emerged in our interviews, provided a context in which Illich’s work as a whole could be understood and appreciated in a new way. In 1992, Hoinacki’s transcription, re-edited and introduced by me, was published as *Ivan Illich in Conversation*. Reaction to the book fully justified Hoinacki’s intuition that it would shed new and clarifying light on what he would later call Illich’s “trajectory.” Illich never read the work or listened to my radio programs, but he did profess amazement that even old friends had come to him, after reading *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, and said that they, at last, understood what he was saying.

The greatest and most consequential of the surprises that I received during my first recorded conversations with Illich came toward the end. I had asked him about a remark Lee Hoinacki had made to me the day before. All of Illich’s work, Hoinacki had told me, could be understood as an attempt to “do theology in a new way.” Yes, Illich replied, Lee is right, I have only tried “to walk beneath the nose of God.” Then, after joking that God must have “a nose as big as mine,” he added: “. . . my work is an attempt to accept with great sadness, the fact of Western culture. [Historian Christopher] Dawson has a passage where he says that the Church is Europe and Europe is the Church, and I say, *yes! corruptio optimi quae est pessima* [the corruption of the best is the worst]. Through the attempt to insure, to guarantee, to regulate Revelation, the best becomes the worst.” I didn’t know it at the time, but he had stated the same thesis in a sermon preached at the Fourth Presbyterian Church in downtown Chicago the year before. On that occasion he began, “I want to explore with you a phenomenon that I consider constitutive of the West, of that West which has shaped me, body and soul, flesh and blood. This central reality of the West is

marvelously expressed in the old Latin phrase: *Corruptio optimi quae est pessima*—the historical progression in which God’s Incarnation is turned topsy-turvy, inside out. I want to speak of the mysterious darkness that envelops our world, the demonic night paradoxically resulting from the world’s equally mysterious vocation to glory.”

I found this idea both strange and compelling. I was familiar, of course, with the idea that the West had “secularized” its Christian heritage, even if I had never thought deeply about how this mysterious transformation was effected, but Illich was saying something I had never heard or thought: that modernity was Christianity turned inside out and that this was not merely a benign transformation, in which the kernel was kept and the husk discarded, but a perversion that maintained a mysterious proportionality with its source. There was no chance, at the end of what had already been a very long interview, to pursue this idea, but, happily, the following summer, Illich came to Toronto to address a conference organized by the *Fourth World Review* and stayed with my family and me for several days. There was a lot of opportunity to talk during this visit, and one of the things I most wanted to talk about was his idea that modernity is best understood as a corruption of the best, which is the worst. Why, I asked Illich, had he never made this the subject of a book? As we parted, he promised me that the next time we met he would have “several chapters” of this book ready for my perusal. We met as often as I could manage it during the ensuing years, particularly when he was relatively nearby in State College, where he continued to teach and assemble a scene every fall through 1996, but I never got those chapters.

There were several reasons for this. One was the pain he felt from the tumor that was, by then, swelling and stretching his right cheek. (This tumor—tiny at first—had appeared ten years earlier, and Illich, for reasons I will explain later, had decided to leave it untreated.) He controlled the pain as best he could by smoking opium—a relatively mild drug in its raw state despite the fearsome reputation its more refined forms have given it—but even his formidable powers of concentration were somewhat undermined as the pain got worse, which it steadily did. Another was the demands on his time made by his many friends. German historian Barbara Duden, whose house in Bremen, Germany, was Illich’s home during the winter months from 1991 until his death in 2002, recalled in a letter to me how he “gave his precious hours in *philia* [friendship] to whomever came.” And, finally, there was a certain reticence in the face of so explosive a theme—a reticence that was reinforced by some of his counselors. I recall, for example, the disapproval of Muska Nagel, an old friend of his who had become a cloistered nun at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut, following the death of her husband.

She took the view that, with the Church as battered by scandal as it already was in the 1990s, this was no time for Illich to publicize views that could so easily be mistaken and misappropriated. Lee Hoinacki, to whom he often referred doubtful decisions, was also hesitant. I don't think these reservations among his friends were necessarily decisive, but I do think they strengthened the reluctance he already felt.

By the mid-'90s I had realized that the book I wanted to read was never going to be written, so I proposed an alternative: I would record interviews with Illich on the theme of *corruptio optimi pessima* with a view, initially, to making another radio series and perhaps eventually a book. This gave him the opening he needed. All his life Illich wrote only when he thought some definite occasion demanded it of him. It might be the request of a friend, or it might be his intuition that contemporary institutions were about to lapse into terminal counterproductivity, but there was always some exigent circumstance that led him to write. He intended no system of thought or literary monument. My urgent and sincere desire that he speak on this subject provided the necessary occasion. This has always seemed to me both remarkable and exemplary—not just that he would respond to my request but that, if there had been no request, he might have let his thoughts go unexpressed. This was also part of his obedience—to trust the occasions that presented themselves and be guided by them.

And so, in the spring of 1997, I spent two weeks with Illich in Mexico, in the village of Ocotepéc on the outskirts of Cuernavaca. During the years between 1961 and 1976, Illich had lived in Cuernavaca as the presiding spirit of the Centre for Intercultural Documentation (CIDOC). After CIDOC closed its doors, he had become a wanderer but had always spent part of the year in the household he had established with his old CIDOC colleague Valentina Borremans in Ocotepéc. The “interviews” we conducted during those days were often more like dictations. I might sometimes follow up with questions, but he basically expounded his subject as he saw fit. Often, I learned the night before what we would talk about the next day. I assimilated these interviews as well as I could, in the midst of my other work at the CBC, and two years later returned to Ocotepéc for another two weeks of recording. These really were interviews in which I prodded Illich for clarifications and elaborations of what he had laid out for me two years before. From these two sets of recordings, I composed a five-hour radio series called “The Corruption of Christianity,” which was broadcast on *Ideas* in early 2000—a resonant date, even if quite fortuitous.

These broadcasts, and the transcript that was made of them, did not allay the ambivalence among some of Illich's friends about my project. I remember Lee

Hoinacki in particular frowning over the transcript and worrying about the ways in which Illich's unpolished and unsystematic presentation might be vulnerable to misinterpretation. Illich too was hesitant about taking the further step of turning our interviews into a second book. He had told me, in 1992, with respect to his idea that modern certainties have their "historical source . . . in a perverse transmutation of . . . Christian vocation," that he had "not even found a first conversational partner within any of the established churches." Nothing had happened in the intervening years to change his sense that he was talking to the wind. To take just one example, he had tried in the year before he died to open a conversation with the Catholic archbishop of Oakland. At the time Illich was the guest of his friend Jerry Brown, a former governor of California, who was then the mayor of Oakland and who would later serve two more terms as governor. In an obituary for Illich, Brown recalled what followed:

[Illich] invited the local archbishop to discuss matters of Catholic theology that greatly troubled him. Before he died, Illich wanted to engage ecclesiastical representatives in a conversation about corruption in the early church and the evolution—as he saw it—of Christian charity from a personal act to planned institutional services. This he called the corruption of the best becoming the worst—*Corruptio optimi quae est pessima*. His interlocutors arrived at my loft and were ushered into the library. Illich spoke at length, summoning up his vast store of Church history. He tried one subject, then another, but the bishop and his clerical assistants seemed nonplussed, even uncomfortable. Soon the conversation was over and our guests excused themselves and left. I am sure they were wondering what in the world Illich was getting at.

This failed encounter summed up the apparent indifference of the Church he had once tried to reform and the oblivion into which his name had fallen within that Church. It also suggested that the book I proposed was likely to have no better reception.

Then, later in the same year that he mystified the archbishop, Illich began to change his mind. He learned, while in Bremen, that Klaus Baier, a Lutheran pastor and lecturer in theology at the nearby University of Oldenburg, had made a German translation of the transcript of our radio series "The Corruption of Christianity" and established a study circle to discuss it. This lively interest shifted Illich's perspective and made him begin to see the good that a book based on our interviews might do. I had a transcription made of all that had been said in both our 1997 and 1999 sessions, and a plan to publish them began to take shape. Illich



and I agreed to meet early in 2003 in order to go over the manuscript and revise it for publication. On December 2, 2002, he died in Bremen. I proceeded with what I had and, in 2005, published *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*.

The origins of the present book lie in that one. What I dared to call Illich's testament—a name some thought presumptuous—was at the same time something vulnerable, exigent, and unfinished. There were reasons, after all, why Illich had maintained his discreet silence on the subject of the Church for so long, reasons why only his trust in me had finally allowed him, as he put it, to “stammer . . . what I have avoided saying for thirty years.” At various points he speaks of what he is telling me as no more than a “hypothesis” or, again, as a set of “possible research themes.” What I had asked for asked something of me in turn. A hypothesis needs testing; research themes need to be followed up. When Illich completed his “stammered” testament in 1997, he said, “I leave it in your hands to make sure that my intention . . . of speaking in gratitude and fidelity to the one behind this candle, which is burning here while I'm talking to you, was not a betrayal of his touching tenderness but a truthful statement, chosen once in my life.” The one behind the candle was always, finally, Christ. His charge was weighty, and in the intervening years, I have felt its insistent weight, even if with gratitude. With this book I offer my answer. In its pages I try to see Illich whole—understanding his various beginnings in the light of what he said to me at the end—and I try to say what I think the example of his life and thought means for our time.

What I have written, though entirely personal and attentive to the incidents of Illich's life as well as his thought, is not a biography. Like the nineteenth-century English novelist George Meredith, who wrote in a letter to a friend, “Horribly will I haunt the man who writes a memoir of me,” Illich would have haunted me had I attempted the synoptic gaze by which the biographer typically tries to surround and comprehend his subject. His biography, he once told me, could never be written because it was “hidden.” Some of this hiding was deliberate, arising from the circumstances in which he had worked as the director of CIDOC in Mexico in the 1960s and early 1970s. Beginning in the later years of the 1960s, when CIDOC was associated with various currents of revolutionary thought in Latin America, Illich had been “shot at and beaten up with chains” by enemies of his institution. Because of the threat to Illich and his collaborators, correspondence and other documents were often destroyed or simply not kept, and the habit of keeping few records and effacing his traces persisted after CIDOC closed in 1976. Consequently, the potential biographer of Illich will have to deal with a very sparse

paper trail. But the implications of “hidden” go much further. He also meant that his story would remain secluded in the recollections of those with whom he had known a unique *vis à vis*. Such relations were, in his word, “shaded” (i.e., known only to the friends themselves). That it should be so, he went on, was a dictate of “chastity,” a virtue he thought of in unusually large terms. A dictionary will tell you that chastity is a synonym of celibacy, but for Illich it meant that state of self-possession and self-control that allowed him the freedom to give himself to whatever or whomever claimed him at a given moment. Each relationship was unrepeatably and, in a deep sense, unknowable. Indeed, a certain refusal to know, and thus put himself “above” his friend or interlocutor, was a condition of the kind of dialogue Illich tried, throughout his life, to create. He spoke about it in a lecture he delivered in a Presbyterian chapel in Chicago in November 1988:

When I submit my heart, my mind, 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, bend over toward the total otherness of someone. But I renounce 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 the 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.

It might be said that Illich believed that one can know another only by first unknowing them. Biography, in the usual sense, cannot be written from this position—from “below,” as he says, or from within the state of ignorance implied by “tak[ing] in the other as a radical surprise.” “You cannot write the biography of a friendship,” he said on another occasion. “It’s too deeply *personal*,” a word that for him signified not just something private but something singular and unspeakable. Consider the almost impossibly stringent conditions that Illich sets out in this quotation. To take in someone as “a radical surprise” means to have no expectations whatever of them—I can’t be surprised by what I expect—but expectation is the very bread and butter of everyday life, its *sine qua non*. Even helpless infants, at their birth, are primed with expectations. And then there’s the renouncing of bridges—I recognize “a substantial likeness,” but I must renounce all the usual concepts and categories by which I explain the other one and assign them to a class or position. The “gulf” between us must be respected and only “leaned into.” And, finally, there’s *faith*, by which I accept the other *at their word*. Obviously, this means something more than playing mindlessly along with the other’s social

presentation or listening endlessly to their chatter—Illich did not always suffer fools gladly—but it clearly refers to some inviolable and unsurpassable ultimacy in each human person. In a later conversation, Illich tried to explain further what it means to know by *faith* and to take the other at their word:

Faith is a mode of knowledge which does not base itself on either my worldly experience or the resources of my intelligence. It finds certainty on the word of someone whom I trust and makes this knowledge which is based on trust more fundamental than anything I can know by reason. This, of course, is a possibility only when I believe that God's word can reach me. It makes sense only if the One whom I trust is God. But it also rubs off on my relationship to other people. It makes me aim at facing people with a willingness to take them for what they reveal about themselves—to take them, therefore, *at their word*—and not for what I know about them. And this is very difficult to do after a hundred years of psychoanalysis . . . The contemporary sociological assumption, whether psychoanalytic or Marxist, is that the other's sense of himself is an illusion shaped by ideology, by social condition, by upbringing, and by education. Only by taking the predictability out of the face of the other can I be surprised by him.

Surprise is often praised, and as often simulated, but rarely welcomed. Surprise, like hope, cannot grasp its object—this object must remain unknown until, suddenly, it appears. Since none of us could live for five minutes without expectations, a taste for surprises must refer to a practice of tempering expectation rather than overcoming it altogether. Modernity clearly tends in the opposite direction—toward what philosopher of science Ian Hacking calls “the taming of chance.” When Francis Bacon announced what his posterity has come to call the “scientific revolution,” he declared his purpose to “hound [nature] in her wanderings” and “bind her to [our] service.” He prophesied a more predictable world, and a more punctual, more standardized, more reliable world has followed. In a commodity-intensive and highly institutionalized society, where unexpected events are usually met with a law or a protocol designed to prevent any recurrence, surprise is the enemy, the sign that the *system* has failed. The only surprises we like are those that aren't, in any deep sense, surprises at all, just the occurrence of something expected at an unexpected time or place.

Illich's preference for surprise, his regard for what remains “shaded” in our relationships, his attempt to “take the predictability out of the face of the other”—all speak against any attempt at definitive biography. So, in Illich's view, does the New Testament. As he understood it, the Gospel clearly renounces the shapely

and self-evident life that one would expect to find related in a modern biography. When Jesus bumps into the brothers Peter and Andrew, fishing, he says only, “Follow me.” They receive no other explanation or instruction as to why they should, on the instant, turn their lives upside down. In the Bible, Illich says, a peremptory summons of this kind is “the primary form of ‘causation.’” Things happen neither by chance nor by necessity but in response to a call—a call that is often heard only by the one to whom it is addressed. Everything depends on that disposition to listen and to respond, which Illich calls obedience.

A life lived, or even attempted, in this way remains out of reach—its reasons hidden in the communion of friends and, finally, in communion with that One whom Illich would name only reluctantly. “A . . . life of any worth,” the English poet John Keats wrote, “is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the mystery of [such a] life—a life like that of the scriptures, figurative.” An allegory is a story with a meaning different from its literal sense. Keats says that very few can discern what is going on at this level because the allegory is written in figures that can only be interpreted from a point of view to which we have no access. Illich said something similar to me with reference to the New Testament parable of the Samaritan who binds the wounds of a stranger who has “fallen among robbers.” (Illich considered this parable a paradigm, or type, of the entire New Testament.) “What happens between the [beaten man] and the Samaritan is a seed,” he told me. “When it grows up, it will be buffeted, and perhaps the stem will even be broken, and it will never come to flower. What we hold on to is the seed.” He went on to say that all the gifts of the spirit are “like seeds, no matter what happens historically, biographically, to them.” Their meaning can only be understood apocalyptically. “The apocalypse is the moment at which the meaning of my own life will be revealed to me,” he said finally. “That’s something totally different from autobiography or, even worse, biography.” This moment of seeing is what Jesus refers to in his parable of “the wheat and the tares.” (We would say *weeds* today, but the parable is still known to many, and certainly to me, by the King James Bible’s archaic word *tares*.) In this parable, he compares the kingdom of heaven to a field in which a householder has sown good seed, only to have an enemy come in the night and sow weeds, which grow up with the grain. The householder’s servants ask him whether they should try to weed the field, and he says, “No, lest in gathering the weeds, you root up the wheat along with them.” They can be separated, he says, only “at the harvest.” Biography, if we apply this image, recounts the everyday life in which the wheat and the weeds are inextricable and, often, indistinguishable. Only at the harvest, the moment Illich calls apocalypse, will the meaning be apparent.

In the year before he died, the English poet William Blake left his autograph in the album of his friend William Upcott: “William Blake,” he wrote, “Born 28 Nov. 1757 and has died several times since.” These deaths were what Blake also called Last Judgments. “Whenever any Individual Rejects Error & Embraces Truth,” he wrote in his commentary on his painting of that name, “a Last Judgment passes upon that individual.” Blake provides another example of the view that our lives harbor what Illich calls “a mysterious historicity”—a significance lying below the biographical surface in the form of what Illich calls “seeds,” or Keats, “allegory.” “The ruins of time,” Blake says, “build mansions in eternity.” The point is not that we can know nothing of others but that what we can know depends on how, and from where, we look. Biography, in the contemporary sense, often presumes that the reality of the biographical subject can be made fully visible and fully available to the biographer’s penetrating and unembarrassed gaze. No “mysterious historicity” needs to be taken into account. That, for the contemporary biographer, would be a defeatist and obscurantist assumption—whatever hides evokes suspicion and demands, for that very reason, to be exposed. Illich has a profoundly different view. He thinks that only death, the final surprise, will disclose the meaning of what has gone before and that he can better understand the one he is facing by first learning to bracket all ready-made explanations.

I have dwelt at some length on Illich’s aversion to biography, not only to justify my somewhat circumspect method in the following pages but also as a way of introducing a man who thought outside and against many taken-for-granted modern *certainties*, as he called them. Certainties are those things that we can’t think *about* because they are what we think *with*—they are what lie, Illich says, “beyond the horizon of our attention.” Contemporary critique often revolves in a circle within this horizon—rejecting one assumption only by tightening the grip of some other unthought premise. Illich was more searching in his attempt to uncover the roots of modern ways of life and pathways of thought. Biography, as the assumption of our essential transparency, is a good example. He rejected the world of total visibility, in which each one can and must be made known, and he rejected it in the way he lived as much as in the way he thought.

This radicalism should not be taken as implying any affectation on his part or any merely prissy or puritanical distaste for contemporary mores. Illich was a thoroughly modern man, and he lived with his eyes open—alert to his own contradictions as much as to those of others. There was, for example, a quite dramatic contrast between his way of life—he was a “frequent flier” with friends all over the world—and his advocacy of technological restraint, local autarchy, and limits

to speed. He did not try to hide or extenuate such inconsistencies, once joking with me that in getting to and from an upcoming meeting that he was to address in Italy he would “consume as much oxygen as a herd of twenty elephants would consume in their lifetime, and not even produce the shit elephants produce.” “I try to be austere and draw my lines,” he went on, but “you can’t find security in austerity [or] you are really through.” He wasn’t seeking “a lovelier life,” he said, or personal justification. He was seeking, to put it as simply as possible, conditions favorable to “the practice of love.” This certainly involved living within limits and, to that extent, involved austerities or renunciations. Such restrictions, for him, were never ends in themselves but always only preparations for the deeper communion between people that he thought was impeded and often prevented altogether by the glitter and the glut of a technologically unrestrained society. Celebration was always the keynote. “I know only one way of transforming us, *us* meaning always those I can touch and come close to, and that’s deep enjoyment of being here alive at this moment, and a mutual admonition to do it—please don’t misunderstand me, I’m not a touchy-feely man—in the most naked way possible, *nudum Christum sequere*, nakedly following the naked Christ which was the ideal of some of the medieval monks whom I read.” This was Illich: an ascetic who counseled enjoyment, a world traveler who inveighed against “the few who get the privilege of being almost omnipresent in the world.” He himself often chose paradoxical or contradictory figures to describe himself—from the *sobria inebrietas* (drunken sobriety) that he once praised to me to the joyful austerity that he recommends in *Tools for Conviviality*.

My intentions here are similarly contradictory. In line with my previous reflections on the impudence of biography, I want to preserve and protect my subject from explanations that would in any way dissipate the “mysterious historicity” of his life. At the same time, I will have a good deal to say, in what follows, about the various circumstances in which Illich lived. His literary works, as I’ve said, were all, in some sense, occasional, and knowledge of these occasions can certainly improve understanding of them. He was also a man who was profoundly attuned to the significance of the age in which he lived, alert to what Jesus called “the signs of the times,” and so some account of the nature of those times will also aid interpretation. Illich’s work, for example, throws a different light on the 1960s than the prevalent pop-cultural stereotype, and just as his work helps us understand the 1960s, so a deeper understanding of this period can help us understand him in turn.

Ivan Illich was my friend, and that is certainly the context in which this book should be read. It continues a conversation that went on for many years.

Apprehensive that constant use of the name by which I knew him might seem coy or cloying, I refer to him here always as Illich, but it should be remembered that I am speaking of a beloved friend whom I obviously called by his first name. This friend was at the same time my teacher—a circumstance that may require brief explanation. I have related my first encounter with Illich's writing in the summer of 1968, when I was trying to make sense of my previous two years as a very young and rather innocent apostle of international development, and he was the one whose analysis supplied this sense. This pattern would be repeated many times. *Deschooling Society* (1971) gave me the courage and the conviction to step outside the boundaries of compulsory schooling in the education of my children. *Tools for Conviviality* (1973) made me see the importance of physical scale in political thought and showed me the hopelessness of trying to plot a responsive contemporary politics on a single left-right axis. *Medical Nemesis* laid the foundations for various essays in demedicalization—home birth and a continuing attempt to rethink the prevalent image of death-as-enemy are just two of many possible examples. *Shadow Work* began a questioning of the root assumptions of modern economics that remains, to me, a prerequisite for any political reconstruction. *Gender* indicated the possibility of a renewed relationship of respect, tact, and admiration between men and women. *In the Vineyard of the Text* made me understand the real significance of text in the making of the age that is now ending. These are just brief capsules, but they all speak of a writer who thought well ahead of me and well beyond what I would have been capable of without his guidance, someone whose analysis I trusted even when I couldn't yet fully comprehend it. He was in this sense my teacher and *maître à penser*. A teacher is a bridge. One doesn't have to go all the way to "surrendering to the *guru*," as some unwise, contemporary Western followers of Eastern religions have done, to recognize that there are times when one must trust the authority of what has shown itself trustworthy. In this sense I took Illich "at his word." On the other hand, he was, as I've said, a friend and, to that extent, an equal. Illich had a magnetic personality and presence. He sometimes rued it, and often tried to veil, counteract, or undermine his influence over others, but it was his fate nonetheless. Happily, I was not much subject to this power. The life of a householder and broadcaster in Toronto kept me out of his orbit, and I was not afraid to disagree with him, even if the occasions for that were few. Likewise, I was able to understand that clairvoyant powers of intellectual discernment could coexist with quite ordinary vanities, fallibilities, errors of judgment, and so on. Perhaps it was this combination—that I loved him but could withstand his melting gaze—that qualified me to be the

amanuensis of his old age and the vehicle for those thoughts that he never quite dared to share in writing.

Illich's career can be divided, roughly speaking, into four periods. It began in New York in 1951, when he became an assistant parish priest at the Church of the Incarnation in the Washington Heights neighborhood. There he became a champion of the Puerto Ricans who were then migrating in large numbers to New York. He was an eager and receptive student of the more communally oriented Catholicism of his Puerto Rican parishioners, and he pressed his sometimes hostile fellow Catholics to open their hearts, their minds, and their forbidding, fortress-like churches to these newcomers. His experience of the encounter between American and Puerto Rican Catholicism led him, over time, to elaborate a "missiology," or philosophy of mission, which stressed poverty of spirit, listening, and a deep realism about the Church. The Church, he said, is "a sign lifted up among the nations" and "a divine bud which will flower in eternity," but it is also "a power among powers" and one whose power threatens all the more because of the self-righteousness with which it is exercised. In this sense, his missiology, like much of his later teaching, was a mixture of hardheaded sociology and mystical theology. He shared it through the Institute for Intercultural Communication, which he founded in Puerto Rico in 1956, after he was appointed vice rector of the Catholic University there, and later through the Center for Intercultural Formation (CIF), which he established in Cuernavaca, Mexico. (CIF was later absorbed into CIDOC.)

Beginning in the early 1960s, Illich became an increasingly outspoken critic of American missionary programs in Latin America. This was a time when the American church was dramatically expanding its presence there and working in lockstep with the U.S. government's aid program, the Alliance for Progress. Illich took the view that these missions mainly reinforced corrupt clerical establishments and imposed unworkable attitudes and institutions. He also called for a revolution in Church government, describing the Roman Church as "the world's largest non-governmental bureaucracy" and advocating its more or less complete declericalization. These positions inflamed opposition to him within the Church, and, in 1968, as I mentioned previously, he was summoned to Rome by the Holy Office, the modern descendant of the Inquisition, and asked to respond to a scurrilous questionnaire that detailed his "Dangerous Doctrinal Opinions" and "Erroneous Ideas Against the Church." Illich refused to answer these questions, and the next year, when the Vatican acted against CIDOC, he withdrew from Church service altogether, suspending the exercise of his priesthood, though never renouncing it.



The second phase of Illich's career consisted of the series of books he published in the 1970s and the almost inhumanly hectic schedule of lectures, interviews, and conferences that he undertook to promote the ideas he put forward in those books. They were, in order, *The Church, Change and Development*, *Celebration of Awareness*, *Deschooling Society*, *Tools for Conviviality*, *Energy and Equity*, and *Medical Nemesis*, later called *Limits to Medicine*. The first two, *Celebration of Awareness* and *The Church, Change and Development*, collected many of his writings from the 1960s. All the others outlined the constitution of limits that Illich believed contemporary industrial societies must enact in order to retain their humanity. They must decide, he said, on "the roof of technological characteristics under which a society wants to live and be happy." It was his view that Western societies, having made their own "mechanical messiah," now stood at the threshold of what he called "an artificial creation." He foresaw ecological catastrophe—"a gruesome apocalypse," he called it—and warned of an approaching social paralysis that he named "paradoxical counterproductivity." Beyond a certain intensity, he said, compulsory schooling would foster ignorance and anti-intellectualism, high-speed traffic would induce congestion, medicine would undermine the courage to suffer and die, and so on. Illich's tone, at this period, was dire, insofar as he was issuing a prophetic warning, but also hopeful—in retrospect, extraordinarily so. He may, at times, have been whistling in the dark, but from his confident statement in 1971 that "rapid deschooling" was already under way to his prediction at the beginning of *Limits to Medicine* that an "unprecedented housecleaning" was about to begin in the "health professions," he maintained the view that radical change was not only possible but imminent.

The third stage in Illich's story can be dated from 1976, the year in which he and his colleagues closed CIDOC and he became a wanderer, "tramping," as he would later recall, on muddy roads "scented by exotic herbs." His "pamphleteering," as he called his earlier writings, didn't end altogether—he still wrote polemical essays and addressed contemporary concerns—but he began to travel on new roads, spending time in India, Japan, and Southeast Asia. He also began to recognize that his efforts at deschooling, demedicalization, deacceleration, and so on had been blocked by myths or certainties lying below the level of everyday thought. He concluded, for example, that deschooling could not occur so long as most remained gripped by "the myth of education," which he defined as "learning under the assumption of scarcity, learning under the assumption that the means for acquiring something called knowledge are scarce." So long as people held this belief as an axiom, or first principle, it would seem entirely natural and obvious

that the “scarce means” available for education ought to be carefully husbanded in specialized institutions and learning acquired outside these institutions depreciated. In pursuit of the origins of such modern certainties, Illich returned to a study of history that had already engaged him as a student. He announced that he was undertaking “a history of scarcity”—scarcity having begun to appear to him as the anchoring myth of modernity.

The culmination of this period was the lectures Illich gave on gender in Berkeley in the fall of 1982 and the book of that name that was published in the same year. Encounters with female historians and reflection on the radical potential of the women’s movement had convinced Illich that the decisive event in the shaping of a modern economic society was the overcoming of gender, which he defined as the division of society into two heterogeneous but complementary spheres. Gender, so defined, was, he said, a human baseline and “a line which ran through every pre-capitalist society” on earth. In societies that were divided in this way, there could be no “labor” in the abstract, no universal circulation, no uniform standard because men and women, insofar as they were gendered, were not of the same kind. They might fight with one another or defer to one another, the degree of patriarchy or matriarchy might vary, but they could not replace one another or compete with one another. So long as the institution of gender prevailed, culture held what we today call *economics* in check—there were no economic neuters endlessly deciding between the alternative uses of scarce resources, just men and women playing the parts their cultures assigned them. This imposed an inherent limit to growth. Illich was excited by this discovery, not because he thought the vanished world of traditional gender could or should be restored but because it provided an invaluable key to economic history and an inspiration to those in our time who, he wrote, “struggle to preserve the biosphere,” reject “the market’s regime of scarcity,” and “attempt to recover and enlarge . . . the commons.”

Neither Illich’s lectures nor his book were well received. No review that I saw really addressed his argument—the headline of one, “Gendered Good Old Days,” more or less captures the tone of skepticism and derision—and his lectures were roundly denounced by the feminists of Berkeley, who staged a formal rebuttal at the conclusion of his presentation. Seven female professors spoke at this counter-conference—one even alleging that Illich’s presentation had displayed “all the salient features of modern propaganda, as exemplified in classics of the genre like *Mein Kampf*.” These critiques were then published as a special issue of the journal *Feminist Issues*. Thus disgraced, Illich’s book fell into oblivion, where it more or less remains. Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his introduction to

a recent Italian reissue of *Gender*, argues that Illich can now be better understood. Illich's work is reaching, Agamben says hopefully, "the hour of its legibility." The republication of the book in Italy is certainly one sign that this is true, but it does not yet seem to be the case in North America, where the book continues to be forgotten or overlooked. For example, much has recently been made of historian Joan W. Scott's 1986 article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." The essay has been reissued and a whole book devoted to exploring its implications and legacy, but in all this discussion, there has been no mention whatsoever of the historian who, four years before Scott wrote, also found gender to be a useful category of historical analysis.

The reaction to *Gender* was an epoch in Illich's career and, I will argue, in the history of the social movements whose ear he largely lost as a result of the controversy over the book. His work, in the fourth and final phase of his career, gained much less public attention than his earlier writings. This dimming of his celebrity was, in many ways, a blessing for a man who never wanted to become the captive of what he had written, but it did mean that brilliant work, most notably 1993's *In the Vineyard of the Text*, went almost unnoticed. Illich, in this final period, had two central concerns. One was the change he felt had come over his world during the 1980s—a "change in the mental space in which many people live," he said, and one that "I had not expected in my lifetime to observe." He characterized this watershed as a passage from an age of instrumentality to an age of systems. In the first age, which he believed extended roughly from the twelfth century to our time, the creation of effective tools had been the leading idea. Society had been increasingly dominated during this time by an "extraordinary intensity of purposefulness." People had cultivated a detached objectivity that allowed them to make and remake the world around them—readers stood reflectively apart from the texts they read and users of tools apart from the tools they used. (A tool, in the expanded sense Illich gave the word, could as easily be a hospital as a hammer.) In the age of systems, he claimed, this distinction between user and tool, reader and text, had collapsed. People were being "swallowed by the system." "The computer," he said, "cannot be conceptualized as a tool in the sense that has prevailed for the last 800 years." In cybernetic systems, the operator becomes part of the system and people lose the ability to distinguish themselves from the networks in which they are enmeshed.

Illich thought of himself as a philosopher of technology—his great theme was the way in which the prosthetic environments humans have created since flint first struck fire shape the way we think, feel, and sense. "The subject of my writing,"

he said, “has been the *perception of sense* in the way we live.” But now he began to fear that people were losing their senses. “Soul-capturing abstractions,” he wrote, “have extended themselves over the perception of world and self like plastic pillowcases.” Many of Illich’s late writings are meditations on the transition from the age of tools to the age of systems. His approach to this transition, as one who had chosen history as his way of understanding the present, was to study watersheds in the history of literacy in order to shed light on the watershed over which we are now, all too unconsciously, passing.

Illich’s second major subject in his final period was his “hypothesis that modernity can be studied as an extension of church history”—the concern he summed up in the Latin adage *corruptio optimi pessima*. This theme was present in his writing from its beginnings. As early as 1957, when he was made a member of the board that governed all educational institutions in Puerto Rico, he quickly realized that he had entered a milieu that seemed “ridiculously similar to a religious one.” He pointed out this similarity many times in *Deschooling Society*, calling schooling “a World church,” a “ritualization of progress,” and a continuation of the “church services” instituted in the late Middle Ages. But it was only in the second half of his book *Gender* that he began the more systematic exploration of modernity’s roots in the Church to which I am referring—another feature of that beleaguered book that was overlooked by its critics. This theme developed throughout the 1980s and was typified in Illich’s saying to me in 1988 that the modern West is “the perversion of Revelation.” The interviews presented in *The Rivers North of the Future* capped his exploration of this topic but by no means exhausted it. He was not putting forward, he said, a finished theory or a conclusion but only a “research hypothesis,” a light to guide further exploration along a way that he was only able to sketch. The present book, as I’ve said, is part of this continuation.

My division of Illich’s career into these much-too-neat periods is intended only to give my reader a rough introductory outline of his life and work and not to arbitrarily partition an *oeuvre* that, for all its adventurousness and openness to surprise, remains of a piece. The source of this unity was Illich’s having tried, always, to walk “beneath the nose of God” or to “nakedly follow the naked Christ.” He went where he felt he was called to go—by his gifts, by his times, and by the ones whose ways crossed with his—and he taught others, as far as they could, to do the same. His faith was his inspiration but also the source of his tragic awareness that “its institutionalization” had produced “an evil deeper than I could have known with my unaided eyes and mind”—that evil that has led humanity into its present apocalyptic extremity while at the same time blinding us to the revela-

tion we are perverting. A moment ago, I quoted Giorgio Agamben's statement that Illich's work has finally arrived at "the hour of its legibility"—a phrase Agamben borrows from his beloved Walter Benjamin. Agamben goes on to say that our present modernity can be characterized by its endless deferral of judgment—a posture that he thinks originates in the Church, an institution that can only preserve its own existence by endlessly postponing the judgment it announces. Our world is in perpetual crisis, a crisis that never resolves because resolving it would end the game. Crisis is "our normal state," Agamben says, the consequence of never allowing a final judgment to be reached. Illich, as Agamben sees him, was willing to reach judgment—to face a moment of decision—to speak for that messianic perspective that interrupts the endless line of time and history. There was a moment, now nearly a half century ago, when Illich believed that this time had come historically—a time at which he thought people might suddenly awaken from the impossible dream of endless growth and ever-intensifying institutional care and begin to undertake the renunciations that would allow them to celebrate present abundance. But the moment that Illich had thought "propitious for a major change of direction in search of a hopeful future" passed. The judgment he entered against a society swaddled in counterfeit care and on the brink of terminal social paralysis was again deferred, the crisis prolonged. This does not prove Illich to have been wrong. Indeed, the consequences he foresaw, if people did not undergo that "change of mind" of which the New Testament speaks, have largely come to pass. He predicted in *Tools for Conviviality* that, should technology not be restrained and the "balances" proper to nature and society restored, the consequence would be an increasingly "uninhabitable" social and natural environment in which personal initiative would shrink, polarization would grow, "all bridges to a normative past" would be broken, and "the world [would be] transform[ed] . . . into a treatment ward in which people are constantly taught, socialized, normalized, tested and reformed." This seems to me a pretty accurate pencil sketch of the present moment, even if the "uninhabitability" is unevenly distributed.

What Agamben means by his claim that "the hour of [Illich's] legibility" has struck is precisely this: that the future Illich prophesied is more and more present and that this urges a careful rereading of his anatomy of Western civilization. Of particular importance to Agamben, himself a tireless explorer of the theological origins of contemporary habits of thought, is Illich's claim that "the roots of modernity" lie in "attempts to institutionalize, legitimize and manage Christian vocation"—"Christian vocation" being the calling that is summarized in Jesus' "commandment . . . to love one another as I have loved you" and "institutionalization"

meaning the perverse attempt to turn this love into an efficient machine that needs no inspiration to deliver its products on time and on budget. In what follows I will unfold Illich's work, as I understand it, through all of its seasons. I will attend to the times that provoked his thinking and to the "inner biography" of the man who so sensitively registered those times. I will also argue that Illich is an exemplary figure for the present time, and this in spite of his being, as he once remarked to his friend John McKnight, a proscriptive rather than a prescriptive thinker (i.e., one who mostly spoke about what a good society is not rather than what it is and left the rest to "the surprising inventiveness of people"). *Example* was a word Illich liked and distinguished from *imitation*. Imitation merely copies, he said, while example lights a way that each follows in their own way. I think Illich gives an example or shows a way to the present moment in several senses. First of all, Illich lived as he taught. Throughout his life he tried to create settings where friendship could flower and head and heart could reunite. It was his view that at the very beginning of that long modernity that he called the age of instrumentality, there was a divorce between the formation of the heart, in the biblical sense of the inward person, and the formation of the analytical mind. Knowledge, as science, was segregated from contemplation, and it came to be widely believed that only thought that is withdrawn, objective, and dispassionate can ever overcome what Francis Bacon called "the idols of the mind" and achieve clarity. Illich tried to create "a new complementarity" between "the practice of love" and "critical habits of thought" while at the same noting that what he proposed was not a restoration of some romanticized past but rather "something profoundly different from any[thing] previously known." In this sense, Illich gave an example of an integral or reunited life, an example that I believe will prove important for any community that is attempting to keep tradition from drowning in the cascade of novelties that now threaten even the recent past with oblivion and obsolescence.

A second important sense in which Illich is exemplary is in his attempt to make visible the religious and ritual aspects of modernity. From his description of compulsory schooling as "a ritualization of progress" to his late remark to me that "risk awareness" is "the most important religiously celebrated ideology today," Illich treated modern institutions as displaced churches. Each, in its way, evinces the belief that "[it] can do what God cannot, namely manipulate others for their own salvation." This insight has a number of implications. It suggests first of all that we habitually mistake the nature of the institutions that direct and dominate most of our lives. If you take a school system, for example, as "a practical arrangement for imparting education, or for creating equality," then you have, according

to Illich, fundamentally misunderstood its purpose as well as how it came to be in the first place. What school and university systems actually do is to supply credentials for jobs, and often for jobs that don't even require the training to which the credentials supposedly testify, but education continues to be hallowed by that "ceremonial" or "ritual" quality that, for Illich, constitutes its "hidden curriculum." This discrepancy between what the institution says it does and what it actually does leads to epidemic lying and disorientation, and this bad faith is characteristic of every major contemporary institution, not just schools and universities. Wherever institutions confound their own interests with the salvation that they promise, crippling illusions are generated. Illich urges what his friend Paul Goodman called a "new reformation" that would radically curtail the power, scope, and pretensions of modern institutions and set people free from the institutions' power to prescribe how things shall be done and who has the right to do them.

Illich's critique of modern institutions, and his call for "institutional revolution," has a further implication. If modern institutions are animated by an unconscious Christian ideology, then many people who think they have repudiated, forgotten, or overcome Christianity remain, in a very practical sense, Christians. They practice rituals that make no sense without reference to their Christian originals, and they practice them, moreover, with a confidence whose source they can never acknowledge inasmuch they have made Christianity, and religion in general, their scapegoat. This is an inherently confusing and contradictory situation. Contemporary discussion of religion often conceives of it as a phenomenon that is confined to its manifest and explicit forms—religion is what calls itself religion and transpires in acknowledged *religious* settings. If Illich is right that "modernity can be studied as an extension of church history," then most of religion is invisible—like an iceberg, it carries the majority of its bulk below the water. In this sense, Illich can be seen as an inheritor of theologian Karl Barth, who argued that religion is not a voluntary institution but rather an inescapable human predicament—"a yoke," Barth said. This yoke cannot be put off. "Man's perpetual genius," says Calvin, "is to be a factory of idols," and in consequence, there is nothing beyond religion but more religion. But the predicament can be recognized, acknowledged, and named. One can, as Illich says, "celebrate awareness." The contradiction between revelation, which is from God, and religion, which people make and then succumb to, cannot be definitively overcome, but it can be kept in mind, danced with, and laughed about. Illich also adds something to Barth, I think. This is his understanding of just how far "the net of religion" extends and where it is to be found today. (The phrase *the net of religion* comes from William

Blake, who prefigures Barth and Illich on this point.). This promises not just an unveiling of the true nature of modern institutions but also a better understanding of religion. It also hints at a renewed Christianity that will no longer embody its faith in the state-like institutional forms of which Illich believes modernity to be a transposition.

A final sense in which Illich is exemplary has to do with the contemporary experience of surfeit. Many of the people I know live in a condition in which all spaces seem fully saturated. Education never ends, health is a constant preoccupation, communication is unrelenting. Both speech and thought are continually entrained by careful “messaging,” branding has become a pervasive metaphor, and ready-made figures of speech increasingly inhibit personal expression. Saturation seems a good word for this, inasmuch as it evokes a state of awareness in which every site is preoccupied, every seat taken, every predicament mapped and addressed in advance of its occurrence. This is exactly the condition of which Illich warned when he spoke of the “disabling” effects of professional hegemonies. He spoke of an *alienation* that would penetrate much more deeply than the estrangement of which Marx spoke when he pointed to the dissociation workers experience on encountering their own products as alien powers. In a society whose primary product is “services,” even the most elementary capacities—to give birth, to die, to love, to grieve—come under management, and it comes to seem obvious that these abilities can all be refined and improved by the relevant expertise. “The mind and the heart” are colonized, Illich says. The answer, for Illich, was not to deprecate all expertise and return to tradition but rather to strike a balance. He wanted to write a constitution of limits that would restrain professional expertise at a politically determined line and allow an opposing space for what he called the vernacular or the homemade. Again and again, he wrote of balances and of complementary domains and denounced what William Blake called “single vision.” “Once thinking becomes a monocular perception of reality,” Illich said, “it’s dead.” We now live after the flood that Illich foresaw—in an age in which it is no longer possible to imagine that compulsory schooling might be dis-established, that a “political majority” might be assembled in favor of what I have called a constitution of limits, that language might once again become a commons and not the plastic medium of professional communicators. Nevertheless, I think Illich’s writings retain a powerful ability to guide, to warn, and to aid understanding for those who are trying to keep their footing in the flood. What cannot be changed can still be withstood. Friendships can be kept free of those therapeutic designs that are antithetical to friendship. Spaces of conviviality and celebration can be



conserved. Illich shows a way of thinking and a way of living that can still inspire, even if he is speaking only to the incipient neo-monastic culture that will conserve tradition through the new age for which philosopher Catherine Malabou has aptly proposed “plasticity” as the dominant metaphor or image.

Two final notes before I begin. The first concerns my religious background. I grew up in a milieu steeped in Anglican Christianity, whereas Illich’s formation was deeply Roman Catholic. A Catholic theologian who read my book before publication noted and questioned my resorting to Protestant thinkers to explicate Illich—for example, my earlier reference to Karl Barth—rather than to his own Catholic sources. This reflects a patchy and eclectic education as much as any Protestant prejudice, but it probably warrants a disclaimer. I have no theological training and an incomplete knowledge of the Catholic milieu in which Illich was formed. The thinkers I cite are often those who have helped *me* understand Illich and not necessarily those who shaped *his* thinking. Reader beware. The second note concerns word usage. Grammatical or syntactical conscience is a strange thing, and I find myself on shifting ground with regard to the *singular they* (i.e. the use of *they* to refer to a singular general noun, like *doctor* or *teacher*, so as not to impute gender to that noun). Sometimes, when it feels acceptable, I use the singular *they*, and, at other times, when it clangs intolerably, I use *he/she*. (My preference would be for female writers to use *she* and males *he*, but that doesn’t allow the reformed male writer to signify that he knows that all firefighters or fishers or whatever are not male.) I hope my reader will bear with me through this inconsistent usage. In Illich the default male prevails at all times, and I have not tried to change him, though there is a brief discussion of how his habitual recourse to *man* as the archetype of humanity is to be understood in the age, as it were, after *man*. Inspired by Ray Monk’s biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein, I have eliminated all numbered footnotes from the text. Notes, giving the source of all quotations and references and occasionally elaborating on the main text, can be found at the back. Quotations are identified by their first few words and keyed to the page on which they appear. I hope my readers find this convenient.