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# Ivan Illich in Conversation with David Cayley<sup>1</sup>

## Ivan Illich

**T**he willingness to step outside the embrace of the community is evident in the parable of the Samaritan. Jesus tells the story in response to the question of “a certain lawyer”, that is, a man versed in the Law of Moses, who asks, “Who is my neighbor?” A man, Jesus says, was going from Jerusalem to Jericho when he was set upon by robbers, stripped, beaten, and left half-dead in a ditch by the road. A priest happens by and then a Levite, men associated with the Temple and the community’s approved sacrificial rites, and both pass him by “on the other side.” Then comes a Samaritan, a person whom Jesus’ listeners would have identified as an enemy, a despised outsider from the northern kingdom of Israel who did not worship at the temple. And this Samaritan turns to the wounded one, picks him up, takes him in his arms, dresses his wounds and brings him to an inn where he pays for his convalescence. ...

Several years ago, during an annual lecture series at the University of Bremen, I took the Samaritan as my theme, because my students had asked me if I would discuss ethics. What I tried to point out to them was the suggestion in this story that

we are creatures that find our perfection only by establishing a relationship, and that this relationship may appear arbitrary from everybody else’s point of view, because I do it in response to a call and not a category, in this case the call of the beaten-up Jew in the ditch. This has two implications. The first is that this “ought” is not, and cannot be reduced to a norm. It has a telos [an aim]. It aims at somebody, some body; but not according to a rule. It has become almost impossible for people who today deal with ethics or morality to think in terms of relationships rather than rules. The second implication, and a point I’ll develop more fully later on, is that with the creation of this mode of existence the possibility of its breakage also appears. And this denial, infidelity, turning away, coldness is what the New Testament calls sin, something which can only be recognized by the light of this new glimmer of mutuality. (“Gospel”, p. 50-52) ...

The more I try to examine the present as an historical entity, the more it seems confusing, unbelievable, and incomprehensible. It forces me to accept a set of axioms for which I find no parallels in past societies and displays a puzzling kind of

<sup>1</sup> These passages come from *The Rivers North of the Future. The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*, Anansi, Toronto, 2005.



horror, cruelty, and degradation with no precedent in other historical epochs. ...

I would say that this can be looked at in an entirely new light if you begin from the assumption I spoke of earlier: that we are not standing in front of an evil of the ordinary kind but of that corruption of the best which occurs when the Gospel is institutionalized, and love is transmogrified [transformed into a grotesque shape] into claims for service. The first generations of Christianity recognized that a mysterious type of — how shall I call it? — perversion, inhumanity, denial had become possible. Their idea of the *mysterium iniquitatis*, [mystery of evil] gives me a key to understand the evil which I face now and for which I can't find a word. I, at least, as a man of faith, should call this evil a mysterious betrayal or perversion of the kind of freedom which the Gospels brought.

What I have stammered here, talking freely and unprepared, I have avoided saying for thirty years. Let me now try and say it in a way that others can hear it: the more you allow yourself to conceive of the evil you see as evil of a new kind, of a mysterious kind, the more intense becomes the temptation — I can't avoid saying it, I cannot go on without saying it — of cursing God's Incarnation.<sup>2</sup>

Let me give a concrete example, because I was thinking of it this morning, of the perversion of love of which I'm speaking. It concerns a man in a Mexican village whose kidneys got ruined, I guess by tequila. The local doctor said, we can only help you by providing you with a new kid-

ney or with kidney dialysis. They took him off, and he died miserably, not so long afterwards, in hospital far from his family. But the need for kidney dialysis or kidney replacement had been injected into the entire village. And why should the poor be excluded from a privilege given to the rich? I sat down with pencil and paper with a man who knows the situation in Mexico, and we worked out that the cost of that poor drunkard's last months was equal to the purchase price of forty-two homes of the kind in which the people who now need kidney dialysis live. Why is it that none of our major churches is able to condemn this ritual, myth-making ritual, as something which a Christian can't engage in as a recipient, as a researcher, or as a devoted doctor or nurse? My idea is that it is because people do not see the underbelly of that evil, the way in which it is contrary to freedom in the deep sense, and so they just find it confusing. They don't know what to do, or how to react.

I know I risk being mistaken for a fundamentalist preacher in applying the monstrously churchy term, Anti-Christ, to this new evil. I would have preferred to simply speak about sin, but I was afraid that by using that term I would only heighten the guarantee that I would be misunderstood. Let me now face the extreme difficulty many people will have in understanding what I want to say. I believe that sin is something which did not exist as a human option, as an individual option, as a day-to-day option before Christ gave us the freedom of seeing in each other persons

<sup>2</sup> This statement is exceptionally vulnerable, even in the present context. ... A mystery is not a puzzle is not a puzzle we haven't worked out yet. It is something that our thought, by its nature, cannot penetrate. So Illich speaks here of "an intense temptation" to "curse God's Incarnation" not in order to threaten blasphemy but in order to dramatize the unique, mysterious, world-devouring character of the evil he is trying to describe. (D.C.)

redeemed, someone like him. By opening this new possibility of love, this new way of facing each other, this radical foolishness, as I called it earlier, a new form of betrayal also became possible. Your dignity now depends on me and remains potential so long as I do not bring it into act in our encounter. This denial of your dignity is what sin is. The idea that by not responding to you, when you call upon my fidelity, I thereby personally offend God is fundamental to understanding what Christianity is about. And the mystery that I'm interested in contemplating is a consequence of the perversion of faith throughout history, a perversion that has come to haunt us by the beginning of the twenty-first century and is exactly related to my understanding of sin. ...

We have lost the certainty that the world makes sense because things fit together, that the eye is made to grasp the sunlight, and is not just a biological camera which happens to register this optical effect. We have lost the sense that virtuous behaviour is fitting and appropriate for human beings, and we have lost it in the course of the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries with the rise of the concept and the experience of value. Good is absolute: the light and the eye are simply made for each other, and this unquestioned good is deeply experienced. But once I say that the eye has value for me because it allows me to see or to orient myself in the world, I open a new door. Values can be positive but also negative, so the moment I speak, in philosophy, about values, I assume the existence of a zero point, from which

values rise or decline in two directions. The replacement of the good by the idea of value begins in philosophy, and is then expressed in an ever-growing economic sphere within which my life becomes a pursuit of values rather than a pursuit of what is good for me, which can only be another person. What else could it be? ("Mysterium", p. 60-63)

I have spoken to you more than once about what happens to the idea of virtue when it is suffused by the light of the new freedom which allows the Samaritan to step outside his own milieu and pick up that half-dead Jew in the ditch. Perhaps today we would call that Samaritan an intolerable and violent Palestinian since the point of Jesus' story was that the one who helped was a foreigner, and even an enemy, to the man in the ditch. In the classical world, virtues were inculcated by the willed and intended repetition of good acts until a habit of acting in a good way was created. In the Christian context virtue acquired a new meaning. As a Christian, I know that the practice of virtue requires help. In an ultimate sense it requires God's help or grace, but any reasonable reader of the Gospel will understand that that help comes to me through the other that faces me. This is how, concretely, I encounter the Lord. It's a very intimate thing I say to you, and I'm really embarrassed to say it in front of these microphones you have put on my desk here in Ocotepc. Nevertheless, I dare it. I don't risk it; I dare it. I dare to allow people to listen to how I speak to a friend. ("Fear" p. 95)