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Growing Up with Ivan Illich
(Lecture note)

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Growing Up with Ivan Illich

Bob Duggan, Tai Sophia Institute, March 2004

I am hesitant to speak. Ivan challenged almost every statement that I ever made in his presence. Lao Tzu teaches, “He who knows doesn’t speak. He who speaks doesn’t know”. And, my daily work as a university president forces me to find ways to touch, to speak around issues illustrated by that wonderful prominence below his right ear that he always described as more room for his niece, Monika, to kiss. And, for the sake of my grandchildren, I will speak of one who might be called my Godfather.

One night in 1994 at our home in Maryland, my wife, Susan, told Ivan that she was going to enroll in the degree program at our Institute to study acupuncture. He instantly became furious and said to her, “Susan, you know how to do this, simply start practicing. You don’t need to go to school. In fact, if you go to school, they’ll destroy you.” For Susan and me, it was one of those moments of fear that our loving relationship with Ivan would be cut off by his fierceness. Susan wasn’t prepared to go to jail for Ivan’s desire that she take up needles and, effectively, practice surgery without a license. So, she went to school and Ivan continued to visit. And, school did not destroy her healing gift.

For me, however, it echoed a moment in Oxford in 1974 when Ivan was doing research for *Medi-cal Nemesis*, especially, the section on death. I went to visit him at one of the colleges when he gave a lecture, and I told him that I was studying and practicing acupuncture. He literally did not speak to me – communicate with me – for 10 years until Susan and I showed up at his door front in Ocototec, Mexico in 1985. He disapproved. He did not let us in. He took us out to lunch. That visit opened a door to conversations that continued when I picked him up at Dulles Airport on a snowy night and drove him to State College for the first time. (More on that conversation in a moment.)

I met Ivan, the Reverend John D. Illich, in 1952 when I was an eighth grade altar boy at Incarnation Parish in Upper Manhattan. This was an all Irish area bounded by 168th Street and 181st Street – the East River and Broadway beyond which the Jews (and, Ivan’s mother) lived. This strange speaking, unusual looking man arrived to be one of the curates, one of the five priests of the Parish. I was in a group of altar boys to whom Ivan was teaching Latin, and we, the altar boys, used to play with his strange way with English, encouraging him to say things such as, “Hail, Mary, full of Grapes”. What an extraordinary high school experience to have a mentor, such as Ivan. I helped develop an away-summer camp on a farm owned by the President of a major New York bank. One evening he invited me to visit with Einstein to pick up old blankets for camp. My mother wouldn’t let me go – one of the few regrets in my life. Another time with him, I met the Little Brothers of Jesus who were visiting from Tamanrasset in Africa. What an extraordinary opening for a young person to a world of the ascetic.

As a high school student, what an amazing blend of warmth, friendship, kindness, and fierceness. Whenever I thought I had anything figured out, Ivan would be sure to ask me a question that questioned all my certitudes. In those days I met Joe Fitzpatrick. I helped to print Ivan’s first book, the *Report on the New York Puerto Rican Migrations*. And, I assisted him with the

first San Juan festival in New York City. I didn't realize that he was famous or special. He was just one of the priests in the Parish. I thought that that was just living.

In 1965 – 1966, I was a priest studying in Rome. He was coming and going to the Vatican Council. I wrote to him with my thoughts about leaving the priesthood. I arrived at my room in Rome in October 1966 to receive a letter from him from Cuernavaca challenging my thinking, but never revealing to me that, at the same time, he was the author of *The Vanishing Clergyman*.

Almost 40 years later, I am the President of an accredited graduate school of the healing arts.

I dwell at a crossroads each day in which it is my duty to challenge the most cherished and destructive certitudes of our culture; most notably, those of education, health, death, professions, and our current views of science and systems theory. As a university, I believe it is our duty to challenge the assumptions that are so commonplace.

On that night as we drove from Dulles Airport to State College, Pennsylvania, Ivan asked endless detailed questions about my practice of acupuncture: that I trusted symptoms and the body as wise; that I taught people how to live well; that I saw them less and less frequently, not, more and more; that I was aware of subtle sense perception; that I wasn't making them healthy, nor preventing death. At the end of the drive, as we sat in the Nittany Lodge, he said, "Everyone who speaks this way died 500 years ago. Where did you get this?"

I would like to briefly speak of five principles for our university, for our learning community (as Ivan used to say, "a thinkery"), that have been highlighted for us by Ivan's thinking. I also notice these themes show up in the list of his lectures at Bremen between 1991 and 2002.

1. First, I might say that the core issue is the acceptance of death as part of the cycle of life. Our task is to live peacefully between birth and death. Some years ago, I was asked by friends to attend a Bishop who was near death. I knew they wanted me to use acupuncture, natural medicine, to enhance the chemotherapy so that he would live longer. While we had never met before, we had friends in common, including Ivan. And, I said to him, "Bishop, what is this business about chemotherapy? You have been preaching all your life about getting to heaven, why delay? You have a straight shot at heaven." And, he looked at me shocked. No one had discussed death with him. I said, "Is there anything you have to do before you die?" He said, "Yes, there are these two things." And, I asked, "Are you going to do them?" And, he said, "Oh, my God, yes!" And, he got well, tended those two things, and then promptly took his leave and went to heaven.

A good part of the work of the Institute is teaching the art of dying. In fact, the mission of Tai Sophia Institute (The Great Wisdom Institute) is to teach the art of living and the art of dying through the observing of ancient wisdom and the observing of nature, and to that end, we are creating a university to serve the future generations. There is no better future. No utopia. No world to develop. The art of living well is also the art of being peaceful as we walk between our birth and our death. We currently have more than 375 students enrolled in three de-

gree programs.

2. The second is awakening our sensory awareness. I have written elsewhere about a day some years ago when I almost gave up my clinical practice because I encountered five educated individuals in a row in different rooms at our clinic who could not describe their own pains. They could tell me they had pain. They could tell me the doctor said it was arthritis, bursitis, migraine, gout, but they couldn't tell me the coming and going of the pains. They couldn't tell me if they were hot or cold, severe or weak – just, “I have a pain. I have bursitis.” They had abdicated all sensory observing of their own body in favor of the diagnosed body. They had no sense of proportionality. They were good or bad, healthy or ill. They had no ability to be well in the presence of suffering.

The way I summarize it: They were living in an abstract world, not a phenomenologic world. If they did sense things, they did so in abstracted terms, and they could no longer report the direct observation. I assert that we have now done this with our bodies – with our food, which has become about calories and fuel, not about taste – nor about how I experience my body after enjoying a meal.

3. Third, the attempt to be healthy is an addiction. I spend each day in my practice, and as an educator, recovering how folks live well, rather than how they be healthy – the letting go of the addiction to health in favor of the addiction to learning, friendship, and support-ing each other through our suffering.

One of my best teachers in this is a man named John, who has spent 36 years in a wheelchair, and whom I have never heard complain. The first time I saw John some 18 years ago, he said, “My body's fine. My mind is fine. I run the computer section of a bank. I'm a little bit off spiritually. Do you think you might be able to help?” Now, 18 years later, John has retired from his work at the bank, re-trained himself as a high school math teacher, and tutors 30 children a week. Recently, he had the flu, complicated by pneumonia, and I visited John in the hospital – remember, he's a quadriplegic – can only move his head and hands – and he says, “I'm fine. I just need a little inspira-tion.” He is living fully.

4. Fourth, we are wary of the professionalization of life. Professionalized acupuncture is very different from the acupuncturist in service of the individual who comes to them seeking a healing presence – a professional technique. The technique delivery person is a distinct world body from en fleshed partnership, hospitality, and lasting friendship. I'm aware that even the best, and the most aware, the most loving, the most kind, friendliest practitioners have no idea how much in their daily activities they act as professionals in their professionalized self-interest with a loss to their hospitality and friendship and healing presence for the individual. They offer deliver technique versus presence.

5. Fifth, our university embodies living, as in a cottage industry. Our Tai Sophia University can be a system or a place where people hang out living together. I'm so aware of the awakenss, the sensory alertness to every nuance that is required to keep awake to a place where people hang out and learn together. Ivan often referred to my use of each doorknob as a point of awakenss as I move from place to place in my daily living.

When Ivan and Rusty Roy first visited the Institute in Columbia many years ago, their first comment was, "This is not a cottage industry. This is not Bapu's Hut." My work as President of Tai Sophia is to be sure that it maintains the friendship and hospitality of a cottage, while also having a wide impact for the sake of my grandchildren and all our grand-children. I'm aware that this is our key work at the Institute.

In this, I am proud that my son, Blaize, and the rest of the staff understand that what we are essentially about is a place of hospitality. Years ago, Ivan invited Ray Oldenburg, the author of the *Great Good Place* to the Institute, and that work has deeply influenced our bookstore, our coffee shop, our library, our classrooms – the very design of our building. Yes, we are an accredited institute of graduate higher education and, yes, we are a great, good place where people love to hang out and share with each other.

Our staff and our faculty are very aware, on a day-to-day basis, of the great issues pre-sented to us in the work of Ivan – hospitality, warmth, friendship, sensory awareness, proportionality, the good, being present to each other. And, we struggle to find the ways that allow my son, Blaize, and all our students, to be great students in a university, with-out their learning and awareness being diminished by the image of what education should be.

We are a university focused on conversations, not designing a curriculum. Rather, we are more like a monastery developing with our students the ascetic discipline essential for the art of living and the art of dying.

I thank Ivan for those early confrontations as an altar boy – for always questioning my newly dis-covered certitudes and calling me to live in absolute contingency, and for his absolute unrelenting friendship and love.

Life is mystery. Ivan, himself, was never willing to say, "Let's create this or that." I say that those of us who are here today in order to honor Ivan must clarify our principles for continual rethinking mystery, for continually re-observing the world "in friendship and collaboration and hospitality" – reinventing the possibilities that will serve the future generations.

I honor Jerry Brown, who, in my listening to him on television at one point in the past year, was questioning, questioning, questioning the assumptions of our culture so that new possibilities might arise. He was not questioning the certitudes that concerned Ivan. He was questioning certitudes that he, Jerry, said did not serve.

I deeply trust that in questioning deeply, new possibilities arise. And, I trust new possibilities will look a lot like some ancient possibilities born again to continue to serve the Good.

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