

**Majid Rahnema**

## **GLIMPSES OF IVAN THE PILGRIM**

**(Lecture note)**

**Lecture given at the Lecture Series "Conversations: The Legacies  
of Ivan Illich" at Pitzer College, Claremont (California, USA),  
March 26-March 28, 2004**

Copyright and Date: Majid Rahnema, 2004

For further information please contact:

Silja Samerski  
Albrechtstr.19  
D - 28203 Bremen  
Tel: +49-(0)421-7947546  
Fax: +49-(0)421-705387  
e-mail: piano@uni-bremen.de

**source: <http://www.pudel.uni-bremen.de>**

**Majid Rahnema**

## **GLIMPSES OF IVAN THE PILGRIM**

I have known Ivan for almost 20 years now. I am still 2 years older than him, yet every time I see this playful and adolescent looking sage of the Middle Ages, jumping out of his carefully protected satellite as the latter re-enters our twentieth Century's space, I feel like a child facing once again his favorite magician. Whether his concern of the day is the history of the body, the peregrinations of Hugh St Victor or the waters of forgetfulness, the tours and the hidden trails he invites me to take with him turn out to be fascinating exercises of serendipity. There are moments indeed when I find myself in complete darkness, almost frightened by the novelty of the discoveries. Yet, even in those moments, the spell is so great that I prefer keeping silent and holding my breath, rather than breaking the spell by putting silly questions. In fact, I have now learned not to ask questions of Ivan. For he is not the New Age guru hired to provide you with ready-made answers. His interest is in taking you along with him only to help you discover the yet hidden or elusive dimensions of a question. He leaves you alone then, convinced perhaps that when the searcher is seriously concerned with a question, he has no choice but to stay with it. Yet, he has his own special ways of creating the right alchemy so that, in time, the question answers itself for the patient and concerned questioner.

For the last 20 years, Ivan has been a brother and a great friend to me. In the real sense of the word: that is, a mirror which has helped me to constantly re-discover the world and myself, in such a way as the observed would suffer the least from the conditioned mind of the observer. He has helped me indeed to look at things from unexpectedly original perspectives, particularly from those upside-down positions which have often a therapeutic and liberating effect on our perception of the world.

I actually faced the mirror before I met the playful visionary in person, for Ivan's "Deschooling Society" was the first book which helped me to see more clearly the many contradictions I was then living in my own professional world. I had always been preoccupied by the appalling injustices and discriminations which the oppressed continue to suffer in the fields of education and "development", particularly in my own region. But as every other developer/ educator of my generation, I had been conditioned to be an actomaniac, highly obsessed by the need to produce "tangible" and immediately visible results. This is how, in the four years I served as Minister of Higher Education in Iran (1967-1971), I was hyper-active in improving the physical conditions of our universities and in bringing to them lots of additional money and of "human resources"(!). I had indeed my doubts on whether such reforms were able per se to substantially meet my own deeper concerns about our educational system as a whole, and the socio-political realities in which that system was embedded.

Yet I felt it was the only way for me to do what I thought was right, within the rather privileged space of freedom I had been offered within those realities. When I resigned later from the Cabinet, convinced that higher and more sturdy political and socio-cultural forces were at work over which I had no control, I had started to sense that a rotten egg could not so easily be made less rotten. However, I was yet quite unable to share with Ivan some of his radical

stands on educational reforms. For I interpreted them as an outright rejection of all eggs, on the sole ground that none of them could ultimately be saved.

When I did finally meet Ivan in person, in Teheran, in the early seventies, the pollen he had passed on to me had already germinated in its new environment. My interactions with him remained however confined, for many years, to my deep intellectual curiosity for the *tours de force* his restless and iconoclastic mind were constantly able to produce. What I felt for him was not, like now, coming from the heart. He was then working on his "*Medical Nemesis*", while I had embarked on another type of "project", aimed at "developing" some 2 to 3 hundred thousand people living in a remote part of Iran: the Alashtar area of Lorestan, one of the "poorest", yet perhaps the most beautiful regions of my country. In those days, "we" were a group of enthusiastic activists, convinced that we could change people's lives through scientifically verifiable shots of assistance, aimed at sustainable development.

I was then going through the second period of my evolving perceptions. In a first period, I had shared the strong convictions of a schooled generation for whom development was the only answer to people's problems, as they were entering the "post-colonial" era. It had taken me some time to recognize that development, as it was conceived, was only serving the objectives of a group of "national" leaders and "élites", fostering the same old colonial order under new labels and slogans. Yet, we were all still naïve enough to believe that there was nothing wrong with the concept itself, "maldevelopment" being only the result of its cooption by the élites in question. The task ahead was therefore to bring the concept closer to the meaning "we" had always attributed to it: that is, to help the victims of the colonial order to develop "like a flower from a bud". The "Alashtar Integrated Participatory Development Project" which I started in 1972 in Lorestan, was a desperate, somehow incongruous effort, to reach such an objective through "endogenous", "bottom-up", "self-reliant", "man-centered", and "participatory" development. The approaches we had adopted in that project led me to believe that Ivan might eventually be interested in visiting us. Much of Ivan's critical thoughts on schooling had been incorporated in the designing of our educational activities. The literacy programmes of the project were highly inspired by Paolo Freire's experiments in Brazil. In all other areas such as health, housing, water management and agriculture, the golden rule we had set was that no innovation could be introduced without the active participation of the populations concerned. All these activities, I told Ivan, had resulted, amongst others, to bring down by some two third the infant mortality in the area.

Despite all the facts I brought to his attention, Ivan politely declined my invitation to come and have a closer look at our project. I was disappointed, almost hurt, to find him indifferent to activities which had otherwise so painfully tried to implement some of his own ideas. In all fairness, he did not seek to discourage us to do what we thought was right action. Yet, from whatever he said or not, this is how I then interpreted his reaction: "I wish you well, and hope that you learn a lot from your project. Yet I am not sure your actions could basically alter the situation from the perspective I have been looking at it. Well-intentioned "reforms" here and there can hardly stop the much more powerful forces which are now changing people's lives. Modernization and developmental trends, the overall educational system, professionalization and medicalization of life will be powerful enough to ultimately succeed in coopting everything locally useful you would have achieved. Further, you might find out, some day, that

despite the precautions you are taking, further disabling processes would have been unleashed which none of you could then have the possibility of stopping."

The "successes" reached in the infant mortality area represented, namely, for him only one dimension of reality. They had to be weighed against a whole variety of other factors, in time and space, often unpredictable, yet all potentially able to alter considerably the nature of those fragmented successes. He had a whole set of other questions which all appeared to us highly strange and far-fetched. Amongst others: "Are you sure that the decrease in infant mortality would ultimately be a blessing for the persons you think you have saved? Including their very parents? Besides, could not the changes brought about by your intervention hamper those populations' own efforts to deal more successfully with their predicament?"

When I shared his reflections with the members of our team, some were so shocked as to qualify them as "the sheer rationalizations of a radical, yet basically bourgeois intellectual, who could never understand the daily problems and sufferings of the real people". For others who trusted him more, because they had carefully read his writings, they were even more disappointed that he had not been able to come on the spot and discuss his ideas with everyone. Yet his warnings served us all, in the long run, to avoid as much as possible those developmental activities which could increase the syndromes of self-depreciation in the populations. They also largely contributed to the processes of self-reexamination that brought us to constantly question some of the ideological taboos still shared by many of us.

One reason for Ivan's lack of popularity amongst militant activists is that the right things he says are said, often, in the most provocative way, and at the "worst" moments, that is, at moments when everyone likes to be re-assured in one's belief and illusions, rather than the contrary. This is what produced the feminist outcry against him, when he presented "Gender" in his 82 Seminars in Berkeley. I remember having told him then: "Imagine the two of us in Moscow, in 1917: I am exhilarated by every thing around me, trying to find some way of expressing my dreams of a world finally free from oppression; and you look grim, shaking your head, as the crystal ball you hold in your hands is showing you all the tragedies that are going to happen after the thirties. Don't you think that everyone, including me, would have then wanted to kill you for the simple reason that you were holding such a literally awe-full device?" The trouble with Ivan is that the more his laser-mind quality pierces through the opacity of people's certainties, the more he is led to use it at all costs.

The irreverentious and iconoclastic aspects of Ivan's character are integral parts of his basically "aristocratic" and highly refined personality, one which could even be called diabolic, in the particular sense Rumi, the great Sufi and poet-philosopher Rumi, once viewed the fallen Angel. For, according to him, it was because that closest "companion" to God was created out of fire that he refused to obey the Creator's commandment, when He ordered him to prosterinate before Man, whom the Same had just created out of dirt. The following two stories could better give a glimpse of these aspects of Ivan the contestataire.

The first relates to a visit I had helped to arrange between Ivan and Queen Farah, whom I had always found interested in meeting original thinkers. The audience which was quickly granted lasted more than an hour, for Ivan had seduced the Empress in his own "diabolic" way. He told her that it was good of her to help revive the old Iranian culture, namely by developing

national museums. But he did not hesitate using the opportunity to remind her that one should avoid "museifying" the whole country and treat its living people as art objects, to be kept in a large and highly "protected" zone. Otherwise, culture would become itself a collection of dead pieces, only to attract art amateurs and dealers. The Queen had still found him fascinating, to the point that she was good enough to thank me later for that initiative, asking me to make her meet more often with similar creative minds.

An immediate result of this event was that Kayhan International, the most influential English speaking newspaper of the time, gave Ivan a full page coverage, thus provoking an unprecedented public interest in his books and ideas. He left Teheran, almost the same day that his interview had appeared in Kayhan International.

It was a couple of days later that I had a strange call from a person who introduced himself as a Captain of the Security Forces in the Baluchistan Province. Once the man became sure that I was the "Excellency" he was asked to contact, he said that a fellow bearing the obviously Russian name of Ivan Illich had claimed to know me personally and even to have been my guest for a couple of days. In a tone which expressed the obvious pride of a Security Agent who had finally succeeded in performing the most sensational "catch" of his career, he went on informing me that the fellow in question was, amongst others, holding an American(!) passport. "He was caught while trying to map a highly sensitive military camp, and pretended that he was there only because he was waiting for a bus going to Pakistan."

The officer on the line was terribly deceived when I advised him, for his own sake, to release immediately the presumed Russian/American spy and to apologize for the misunderstanding. For I mentioned that not only had he effectively been my guest, but also that of Her Gracious Majesty the Shahbanou who had granted him a long audience, only a few days ago!

The telephone rang again a day later, this time with a Colonel of the Imperial Forces who introduced himself as the Commander of the other officer. The most obliging Colonel seemed panic-stricken because "His Excellency Dr Illich could not be convinced to kindly end his accidental stay in the military garrison!" Much later, Ivan told me that, after he had indeed been courteously invited to leave the prison, he had refused to do so, for the Officer in charge had asked him to sign a paper printed in Persian. Although the text had been translated orally in English by someone, Ivan had used the pretext to stay yet another day in jail, in order to get the maximum out of that unique and unexpected experience which he had been "privileged" enough to gain from his errands on the Iran-Pakistan border.

The many-faceted personality of Ivan is indeed a permanent source of puzzlement to many, including his closest friends. To persons who happen to meet him in lectures and conferences, he does appear sometimes as a haughty, provocative and arrogant person. Someone in the audience told him once: "Sir, what you said was most interesting, but you don't communicate with your audience!" Ivan's answer was blunt: "But I have no intention, Sir, to communicate with you, whatsoever!" The reaction was indeed perceived by the poor man as an unexpected rebuffal and somehow as an humiliation in public. When I asked him later why he had reacted that way, he seemed to be astonished by my comment. "Majid", he replied, you should know, of all people, that I like to *talk* to people, not to *communicate* with them!!"

Having long been familiar to his allergy toward "amoeba words" (which are all part of the modern "universalist" and meaningless *newspeak*). I realized, of course that, for him, to "communicate" meant precisely to use such hollow and abominable words which were generally geared to some obscure source defining their content. It was not to talk or to converse with another human being in a live and meaningful language. The message could indeed have been much better understood by the unfortunate questioner, had he cared only to express it through the same words he had later shared with me.

But, here again, I learned in time that Ivan's way of delivering his messages is decidedly alien to the criteria normally prescribed in manuals aimed at "winning and influencing people". I guess he realizes well how some of the questions he raises often create in people a sudden and often painful loss of inner security, as some of their most deeply rooted certainties are shattered by his provocative thoughts. The "shock treatments" to which he exposes such people are thus his own professorial manner of initiating a learning process. The persons in question are called to learn from the experience, without anesthetics, and as responsible human beings. I have seen him using such "shock treatments" particularly on people trying to protect their securizing certainties under the mantle of modern "amoeba" language. It is the impatience and sometimes the anger he displays in public towards these (and other persons he suspects to be "phoney" or not serious enough to have done their "home work") that has probably created the image of an aloof and unapproachable Ivan.

However, in reality, he is far from being an historian only interested in the past and in ideas. Persons who know him closely see better, perhaps, how truly attentive and mindful he is towards real and unpretentious human beings. In such cases, Ivan the terrible is thus magically transformed into a prince of the poor who gives and listens with passion, yet whose genuine humility does not alter his basically "aristocratic" behaviour, very much like all the great poor of the world. He no longer uses Thomas Aquinas, Comenius, Halévy or Arriès or other impressive references to back up his arguments. Rather, he acts as a hesitant and patient questioner who is truly interested in the other person's universe. He generously passes on to the latter all his tremendous knowledge of facts and the often invaluable insights he has gained on them, only to help him or her to find original answers to the problem.

It is for all these reasons that Ivan the pilgrim has been a wonderful companion and light to me personally, and I suppose, to all of us who remain wanderers/seekers on our pathless paths towards truth, and who, nonetheless, are fully aware of the many mirages and traps of contemporary illusions.

*Dear Ivan,*

*At times, you have given us the impression that you were not even listening to the questions and doubts of your other pilgrim-companions. But most of us have learned by now that, even then, you were only trying to find out whether we were serious enough in our own probings and questions. The Medieval hakim and the alchemist in you wanted us to see whether we were genuine and patient enough to learn and to stay with our questions, so that in time they would answer themselves. Thank you for what you have been to yourself and to all your*

*friends and listeners. And good luck to you, as you will continue, we hope, your endless pilgrimage in the years ahead . Be they to you as fruitful as in the past, with yet new fruits offering us the latest fragrance of your growing maturity.*

*Khoda tora negahdar!*