

**Barry Sanders**

**ILlich AND LITERACY**  
(Lecture note)

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## Barry Sanders

### ILLICH AND LITERACY

This little conference pays tribute to the life and spirit of Ivan Illich. We are asked to reveal, those of us as participants, how that man of mystery affected our work and, it goes perhaps without saying, our very lives. More than anyone else I know, this priest (on his way, at one point, to becoming a monsignor), loved to tell stories and loved just as much to hear them. He told many of them himself in this very room. I offer him the following one in return. Always, Ivan was listening. I suspect I am bending his ear at this very moment, while he is busy editing my sentences.

While putting together this tale, I concluded, finally, that my story is not special, that everyone meets the right person in his or her life at precisely the right time. It is a matter, I believe, of paying strict attention to each and every encounter. It is a matter of allowing the ordinary, the everyday--what my friend Majid Rahnema calls the quotidian--to take on the luster and feel of the miraculous. For that is all we have, the ordinary and the miraculous. Ivan taught me to see them as the same. Indeed, Ivan told me one afternoon in a defunct gas station in College Park, Pennsylvania--a whole other story--that what characterized growing old for him came down to a revolution in sensibility: everyday experience taking on, more and more, the look and feel of a dream. Ivan had crossed a threshold into a reality where anything was possible; where no daily event seemed out of the ordinary. I have the distinct feeling that Ivan had always moved through the world that way, or, if not, that he had grown old very early on. Whatever the case, under that enormous shadow, I begin.

On a particularly dreary early morning in 1974, while I was standing guard over several drawers from the card catalog in the Honnold Library, a man whom I had met only the night before, unexpectedly, like a spy from a foreign movie, handed me an exquisite present. This was no ordinary man. I already knew that. And so this could be no ordinary present. That, too, I knew for certain. He did not say, "Here," and thrust a package neatly wrapped with crisp corners into my hands. I could not at that moment even see the thing he gave me. Not until some years later did I understand what that gift, with its few but significant strings attached, actually meant to me. But when I finally and fully unwrapped its bulk, it did nothing less than change the way I understood my place in the world. I could neither accept nor decline his present. He provided no choice. But, at that very moment I began the most marvelous intellectual journey of my life, moving out of literature and into... what... I did not know. But many years later, I found myself settled into a field of study called the History of Ideas.

That mysterious stranger was of course Ivan Illich. How I came to meet him I owe, really, to my wife Grace. (A footnote: In a certain way, one does not really meet Ivan so much as he meets or finds you--as if, for years and years, he had been shadowing you and suddenly decided to materialize. Many people in the room have stories, I know, about meeting Ivan in ways that seemed "quite by accident".) As long as I have known Grace, she has always said she wanted to work for a visionary. In fact, Jerry Brown would do just fine. And so we were con-

tinually on the lookout for tidbits about the then governor elect (my personal favorite happens to be his appointment to the UC Board of Regents of Gregory Bateson). One day, in 1974, the Los Angeles Times carried a picture of Jerry Brown holding quite casually two books, two small paperbacks that packed a huge wallop, he told the Times reporter. Every informed citizen had to read these two books, Brown insisted, for they pointed the way to nothing less than the very survival of the planet. But the article neglected to say exactly what they were. The title of the first one we could make out fine: *Small is Beautiful* by E. F. Schumacher. To decipher the second, Grace needed a magnifying glass. Despite its tiny typeface, she could just make out a pair of threesyllable, six-letter words, *Energy and Equity*, written, it appeared, by some obscure Russian or Slav with the improbable name, Ivan Illich. We speculated why anyone would bother to write a book connecting money--equity--with feeling energetic. We knew it could not be a diet book, or an exercise manual. At any rate, we were right; it was certainly obscure. The library did not own a copy, we could not find it through inter-library loan, and we spent several weeks and lots of searching before we could find one in a used book store.

Finally, we got to read its tough, crabbed but precise sentences, which we had to go over and over until we believed we had a slight hold on their meaning. Still, we needed repeated trips to the dictionary to keep straight the distinctions between transit, transport, and transportation. Words that we thought we knew, that we used all the time in easy conversation, suddenly had broken free of their moorings. He caused us to read in an extraordinarily new, and quite radical way--word by bloody word, one sentence in isolation, and then the next, and so on. A paragraph was a skirmish, a chapter a battle--the book itself, total victory. I still believe we--those of here today--have not fully plumbed the many levels of meaning that Illich intended in his work. Over the next months, we devoured all the Illich we could find. We read with that sense of excitement that makes you want to put a book down mid-sentence, so dizzying, so exhilarating, so exciting is the experience that you simply want to savor it.

As luck would have it, we learned a short time later that the graduate school's principle renegade, an assistant, untenured professor of Intellectual History named Simeon Wade, had invited Illich to campus to lecture on his latest work, *Gender*. Grace and I went to hear him, and were invited afterwards by Simeon to his house for what we believed would be an evening of intimate conversation. We accepted. Simeon lived on Foothill Boulevard, one house west of Dartmouth, in the most unassuming box on the block. But it was only a front: He had an enormous surprise waiting for us.

In his usual spirit of more is never quite enough, Simeon decided to liven up the evening by simultaneously playing six separate and different tapes, all by Karlheinz Stockhausen, all at ear-splitting volume. Even more unsettling, he had lined the front of the living room with four or five light boxes the size of several Great Danes. Every second or two, each box flashed a different, wildly bright color--red, orange, violet, purple--while overhead, one of those mirrored balls slowly turned, sending a psychedelic assortment of colors sailing around the room. The entire house was not just loud and bright, it was strobing, as well, making our every bodily movement resemble a jerky frame from a silent movie. Meanwhile, our host had drifted off to the corner in a desperate attempt to light his water pipe.

Sitting cross-legged on the couch, the poor pilgrim from Mexico looked to me to be either entranced or in a trance. No matter the case, there was simply no possibility for conversation, let alone the chance to grab a thought or two out of the chaos. Ivan gave Grace and me the international sign for utter disgust by holding his hand to his forehead and pretending to vomit. He was either too polite, or too nervous, or too scared, to get up and leave.

But not my wife. After fifteen minutes or so, Grace shouted in Simeon's ear to shut the whole damned sensorium down. She had sprung Ivan from prison. For a time, he sat in silence. We all did. Then Ivan rewarded the two of us by talking about a whole raft of ideas, from heterogeneous complementarity, gender, to a little-discussed subject he called shadow work; then to a description of the earliest Sephardic family in Mexico, to an explanation of why the Portuguese say goodbye with *hata logo* instead of *hasta luego*. It turned into an extraordinary evening. He talked, we listened. He talked, we drank wine. He talked, and Grace and I grew light-headed and giddy and left the house with the evening etched deeply into our imaginations.

I thought our encounter had ended. But the following morning, early, I saw Ivan again--in the library. He thanked me; he wanted me to thank Grace--for his rescue the night before from "that electronic opium den." That's when he slipped me the gift. He looked me straight in the eye and asked what I was working on. I told him I was interested in examining the idea of desire in the Middle Ages. He seemed pleased and told me he was setting out to study the history of needs, from Antiquity to the present. He then opened his leather satchel and pulled out thousands of 3 by 5 cards held in groups by an infinity of rubber bands--gummies, as he liked to say. He riffled through the cards, rattling off ideas, authors, figures, places, dates, reference books and reference books that gathered together other reference books, cathedrals, monasteries, call numbers, titles of articles, titles of books, names and locations of obscure libraries--all of it flooding out at such a rapid rate he was fast carrying me out to sea. For your topic; you must visit my old teacher Gerhard Ladner in West LA, he said with that matter of fact insistence of his, and, yes, of course, Heinz van Foerster in Tehachapi, and that woman, the nun, oh what's her name?--just ask, you know--she lives in that convent on the top of the hill in Glendora. I have not seen her in years. Ludolf Kuchenbuch you must see, and Gerhard Kittel you must read, and Jacques Maritain I must tell you about. How is your German? Your medieval Latin? Your Greek?

And oh yes, we should talk at length some time, he added, maybe we could even do some work together on the Middle Ages, pointing out that he, too, held a medieval degree--in the twelfth-century, in liturgical history. I wanted to know what his education was like in Rome; he seemed genuinely interested in my time in Hebrew school. He had read everything, he spoke every language and he seemed to know just about everyone it was worth knowing, and a few who were not. Politics? Well, we must dispense with that right away, he said. He stood very straight now as he spoke: I had some years back, out of sheer frustration, taken up the biggest cudgel I could find against the barbaric insult of the bomb: Against the terror of the mushroom cloud I offered only one weapon--silence. He thrust his long and bony, Cruella De Ville index finger into the air and wagged it vigorously: About the possible extermination of the entire human race, I have absolutely nothing to say. To argue for a moment--to utter even a single word about total annihilation--is pure lunacy. I refuse to participate in such an absurd

conversation. And then he hit his stride again, commenting on the valor of Vietnamese peasants on their bicycles, and the character of the Cubanos on their bicycles.

It was at that moment that he shoved the unmarked parcel into my hands. Listen, these historians think they can just knit the most elegant sweaters in the world. But be careful, he said, they may look pretty but they will not keep you warm. History is not one continuous skein of time. It is filled with breaks, segments, gaps. Into these gaps and holes, we can only stick our noses--here he thrust his face forward--and try to sniff out the truth. We can catch a whiff, that's all. And in the Middle Ages--he pointed across the room, as if he had suddenly located the twelfth century--we find one of those largest gaps, not just a chasm, but a chasm filled with smog and haze. On the far side is the domain of speaking and listening, and on the other, where we stand, are charters, documents, parchment. We can see very little across this epistemic break. We know only that thousands and thousands of sheep gave up their lives so we could experience the privilege of buying and selling, so we could record our stories on their backs. (Jack Goody tells us this; you know this book, no? I did not. I do now. Practically by heart.) On this side of the chasm, I can no longer give my word or offer my handshake to seal a transaction. This kind of human trust has totally vanished. Before the twelfth century, I put my right hand on my testes--and he proceeds, in front of every startled student in the room to demonstrate his point--I put my hand on my testes and swear to God that I am telling the truth or may He bring down on my head the punishment of sterility. This is what testament means--nothing more or less.

I looked at him, disoriented and at a loss for any word. He saw my discomfort, and stopped just short of making the meeting totally embarrassing for me. Then, wrapping up his little bundles, he declared: We will talk about this. You must write me in Mexico. Illich. APDO 479. Ocototec. Senor Ibanez will make certain of the delivery of your letter to my door.

Indeed. I wasted no time in inviting him back to Claremont. And thus began a friendship between us and between Pitzer College. It lasted a long time. Over the years and during the tenure of several Deans of Faculty-Al Schwartz, Ron Macaulay, Susan Seymour--he led five consultations--on gender, on the beginning of life, on medicine, on proportionality and music, on the body, on orality and literacy; he delivered four major lectures in Avery Auditorium; he visited classes; and he lived in various houses in Claremont. For close to fifteen years, this international scholar, Ivan Illich, found his American academic home here at Pitzer College. So unusual is this man that he brought his own hospitality along with him: sometimes it was in the person of Majid Rahnema, sometimes Barbara Duden, Jose Maria Espert, Jean Robert, Thea Cremers, Bob Duggan, Josph Rykwaert; or twenty or thirty other fellow travelers. We had architects, sociologists, economists, historians, nurses, educators of all stripes, ecologists, a prince; we heard from Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Janes, Sufis, and god knows what else. We had readings of Rumi, of Thoreau, of Borges and Auden. We had noise, laughter, shouting--the din of inspired gossip.

While he and I went through some difficult times, they pale to insignificance against the long periods of great fun and laughter, and the long bouts of eating and talking that we enjoyed. Illich embodied friendship; it was his deepest commitment. He stayed with our family in the back room of our house; we stayed with him in Ocototec. He and I gave lectures together in Vancouver, in Toronto, in Berkeley, in Portland, Maine, in State College, Pennsylvania, in

Los Angeles. We spoke to Lee Swenson's small study group of die-hard hippies in his Berkeley house, and to a West-side audience of swells at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. We bought mushrooms together from an old crone in the open-air market in Cuernavaca--"something special I have been saving for Don Ivan," the old lady mumbled, as she pulled out from under her apron the most prehistoric-looking plant I had ever seen--and we rode the rickety bus to Tepotzlan. One horrifying morning, we gave thanks to God in the chapel of San Juan Capistrano for saving us from the long arm of the Immigration officers at the Mexican border. And all the time, from Toronto to Tijuana, we spoke to each other about this threatened invention, literacy. If letters came into history, Ivan liked to say, why couldn't they just as easily leave? My Jewish mother, he would proudly proclaim, makes me a Person of the Book. This, too, the death of the book and what it means for interior life, he would hammer home to audiences. At one point during a talk in Maine, in the midst of Ivan describing his distrust of electronic technology and in particular his terror of email, a young man leaped to his feet and shouted out, "But, Mr. Illich, do you not want to communicate with us?" Ivan immediately shouted back, "No. I have absolutely no desire to communicate with you. You may not interface with me, nor do I wish to be downloaded by you. I should very much like to talk to you, to stare at the tip of your nose, to embrace you. But to communicate--for that I have no desire." Illich taught one to be fearless--on the stage or in the audience.

And so over the years--from the mid-seventies to the end of the century--we rambled and played and laughed. And, of course, we wrote this little book together, the ABC. We talked its ideas into being while hiking the fire trails above Pitzer College, and composed its chapters while sitting in the cactus garden in the Huntington Library. We spent eighteen-hour days in the back room of his compound in Ocotopac, surrounded by Xerox copies, it seemed to me, of the entire contents of the Library of Congress. Oh how he laughed when late one evening, after going through several hundred highfalutin titles for our little offspring, we settled on three letters, ABC. Our time together was for me a training in perception, in attitude, in that most invisible and most precious undertaking--friendship. I have for the past thirty years viewed the world from the perspective he ground out in so many of his books, and articulated in so many of his conversations. His idea of the limits to everything, of the ultimate counterproductivity of every institution is helping me get through these seemingly endless years with George W. Bush.

Next year is my last year of teaching. Holding my hand, my psychopomp Ivan Illich has brought me to what I see as my culminating class, the Wild Child. In it, we look at some of the three hundred children, both boys and girls, who suddenly emerged from the woods in the nineteenth century in various parts of England and Europe. They walked on all fours, most of them, and uttered nothing past a few grunts and growls. One Frenchman found his dog missing, only to discover a ferocious young girl in a tree on his property eating the pet alive. Professionals of all sorts presumed--or hoped--that these young people had been raised by animals--bears, monkeys, wolves, foxes, and so on.

These feral children fed the powerful nineteenth-century desire to test out what historians had referred to as the Forbidden Experiment, the possibility of finding some twelve or thirteen year olds who had been raised without nurture--without culture and language. Scientists were desperate to see how or if they developed. The world would then know a great deal, they argued, about what it is that makes us human, or makes us human beings. How would these

creatures act? Could they think? Would they feel? Fall in love? And of course, at bottom-the shadow of Illich falls immediately across my path here--would they learn language? And if they could not, would that keep them as animals?

The nineteenth century took their cue from historians like Herodotus. He told of a seventh-century BC pharaoh, Psamtek, who left two infants in a mountain hut along with a servant who was warned not to talk to them but to note what language they eventually spoke. The servant reported that their first utterance was the Phrygian word for bread. King James IV of Scotland launched the same experiment in the Renaissance and announced that his infants began speaking in the uncorrupted language of Hebrew. He neglects to tell us what subject they were discussing. The most famous of those wild children is probably the wild boy of Aveyron, who shows up outside of Paris in the year 1800, and who is probably most well known because of Truffault's film, "The Wild Boy of Aveyron." The most recent of the feral children is a thirteen year-old girl with the code name Genie, who appeared one day with her battered, nearly blind mother at the Monrovia Department of Social Services Office in that miraculous year, 1974.

It is wildness in which I am now interested. I have moved-or rather Ivan has moved me-from thinking about the shift from oral cultures to literate ones, from the loss of literacy in our own time with young people, to the total absence of language altogether. I am interested in exploring this condition of wildness, of deviance, and its partner, normalcy. I am fascinated with those nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific experiments in superiority and inferiority. In this class I am currently teaching, we look at the founding of the disciplines, at eugenics and racism, hypnotism and IQ tests, at Dracula and Houdini, the surety of locks and Sherlock Holmes, along with scores of other topics.

This is where my peripatetic friend has brought me, to a book I am now writing about the way in which the nineteenth century has prepared us for the modern world. The Middle Ages still drives me, but for the moment I am firmly planted in the nineteenth century. This has come as a surprise to me. But, as everyone in this room knows, when one touches Ivan Illich, one must always remain open to surprises. As Ivan himself has written, "Our hope of salvation lies in our being surprised by the Other. Let us learn always to receive further surprises. I decided long ago to hope for surprises until the final act of my life-that is to say, in death itself." I would like some day to utter my own similar confidence in the universe. If I do, I will owe it to that obscure Russian or Slavic writer whose name Grace and I first deciphered in the Los Angeles Times, and who later emerged into my dear friend, Ivan Illich.