

Illich at 100: A Guide for Hosts

We are holding a birthday party. A 100th birthday party for a man who is no longer around, and whom most of us never met. And we are holding this party across six different continents.

It's an outlandish proposition – the kind, I suspect, that Ivan Illich would have enjoyed.

There's no "right" way to hold a birthday party, so nothing in what follows is meant as instructions to be followed. Only as clues, as sparks and kindling, should you want some.

Thank you for being a part of this celebration.

— Dougald

<https://aschoolcalledhome.org/illich-at-100/>

Here are [some photos of Illich you can use](#).

So, what could we do?

- It's enough to gather around the table with family or friends, and leave open the invitation for others to join by placing your pin on the map.
- When they met around the table, Illich and his friends would have a candle lit and set an extra place for the stranger who might arrive.

"Our conversation should always go on with the certainty that there is somebody else who will knock at the door, and the candle stands for him or her. It is a constant reminder that the community is never closed."

- There are stories of the spaghetti bowl that would feed all the guests who came back for a meal after one of Illich's lectures. You could take that as an inspiration for a simple meal.
- Others we've heard from are meeting up around picnic blankets, or in an artist's studio, or going for a walk together.
- Your gathering might well include some people to whom Illich's work has mattered in one way or another, along with others who are simply curious – so a simple starting point could be to ask those for whom Illich has been significant to share their stories of how and why this came to be the case, while inviting newcomers to offer questions.
- Some have asked about readings from Illich's work – you could choose your own, or consider using the [three \(and a bit\) short excerpts](#) included at the end of this guide. These have been chosen to offer glimpses of Illich's life as well as a taste of his ideas.
- If you want one short text to discuss in detail, you could use the [Declaration on Soil](#) at the end of this document.
- We've started a collection of some of Illich's "depth charges" (the term is mine, not his!) – those single statements which can shake our hidden assumptions and leave us puzzled in new ways. People have proposed to use these as discussion starters, one of you suggested writing them on paper napkins, another plans to print them up and put them on local noticeboards!
- Illich can be a demanding thinker, his texts are not always easy – but he was not an academic. John McKnight once asked why Illich enjoyed having him around, when he could barely follow the high-flown arguments of some of the scholars they met – and Illich replied, "Because you know instinctively what I struggled for thirty years to learn." Don't feel that you have to organise an academic seminar, then, but trust your own response to what you've encountered in Illich's work.
- In case it's useful for making an invitation, I've put together a couple of [biographical descriptions](#) of Illich – feel free to edit and adapt them to your purposes.

Illich's Depth Charges

In this section, we'll gather a few short statements that give a taste of Illich's thought and the way it can unsettle familiar assumptions:

- "School is the advertising agency which makes you believe that you need the society as it is."
- "All through history, the best measure for bad times was the percentage of food eaten that had to be purchased."
- "In a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy."
- "Societies in which most people depend for most of their goods and services on the personal whim, kindness, or skill of another are called underdeveloped, while those in which living has been transformed into a process of ordering from an all-encompassing store catalogue are called advanced."
- "The quality of a society and of its culture will depend on the status of its unemployed."
- "The household has become the place where the consumption of wages takes place."
- "Certain tools are destructive no matter who owns them, whether it be the Mafia, stockholders, a foreign company, the state, or even a workers' commune. Networks of multilane highways, long-range, wide-band-width transmitters, strip mines, or compulsory school systems are such tools."
- "Wherever the shadow of economic growth touches us, we are left useless unless employed on a job or engaged in consumption."
- "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."

Three-and-a-bit short readings

These are taken from Illich's later work, two from talks and one from an interview, chosen because they give glimpses of his life while also offering a taste of his thinking.

from ['Silence is a Commons'](#) (1981)

At a conference on 'The Computer-Managed Society' in Tokyo, Illich spoke about the historic "commons": those parts of the landscape that were nobody's possession, but from which members of a community had a customary right to take for the needs of their household. He wanted to draw a parallel between the enclosure of such commons and the way in which electronic devices encroach upon "subtle and intimate" parts of our shared lives. Along the way, he offered this portrait of the world of his childhood.

This man who speaks to you was born 55 years ago in Vienna. One month after his birth he was put on a train, and then on a ship and brought to the Island of Brac. Here, in a village on the Dalmatian coast, his grandfather wanted to bless him. My grandfather lived in the house in which his family had lived since the time when Muromachi ruled in Kyoto. Since then on the Dalmatian Coast many rulers had come and gone - the doges of Venice, the sultans of Istanbul, the corsairs of Almissa, the emperors of Austria, and the kings of Yugoslavia. But these many changes in the uniform and language of the governors had changed little in daily life during these 500 years. The very same olive-wood rafters still supported the roof of my grandfather's house. Water was still gathered from the same stone slabs on the roof. The wine was pressed in the same vats, the fish caught from the same kind of boat, and the oil came from trees planted when Edo was in its youth.

My grandfather had received news twice a month. The news now arrived by steamer in three days; and formerly, by sloop, it had taken five days to arrive. When I was born, for the people who lived off the main routes, history still flowed slowly,

imperceptibly. Most of the environment was still in the commons. People lived in houses they had built; moved on streets that had been trampled by the feet of their animals; were autonomous in the procurement and disposal of their water; could depend on their own voices when they wanted to speak up. All this changed with my arrival in Brac.

On the same boat on which I arrived in 1926, the first loudspeaker was landed on the island. Few people there had ever heard of such a thing. Up to that day, all men and women had spoken with more or less equally powerful voices. Henceforth this would change. Henceforth the access to the microphone would determine whose voice shall be magnified. Silence now ceased to be in the commons; it became a resource for which loudspeakers compete. Language itself was transformed thereby from a local commons into a national resource for communication. As enclosure by the lords increased national productivity by denying the individual peasant to keep a few sheep, so the encroachment of the loudspeaker has destroyed that silence which so far had given each man and woman his or her proper and equal voice. Unless you have access to a loudspeaker, you now are silenced.

from 'Land of Found Friends' (1996)

In a conversation with his friends Carl Mitcham and Jerry Brown (for Brown's radio programme, We The People), Illich spoke of his sense that friendship and hospitality might form the starting point for regenerating community and political life in a technological age.

Friendship in the Greek tradition, in the Roman tradition, in the old tradition, was always viewed as the highest point which virtue can reach. Virtue, meaning here, "the habitual facility of doing the good thing," which is fostered by what the Greeks called *politaea*, political life, community life. I know it was a political life in which I wouldn't have liked to participate, with the slaves around and with the women excluded, but I still have to go to Plato or to Cicero: they conceived of friendship as a supreme flowering of the interaction which happens in a good political society. But I

do not believe that friendship today can flower out – can come out – of political life. I do believe that, if there is something like a political life to be, to remain for us, in this world of technology, then it *begins* with friendship.

Therefore my task is to cultivate disciplined, self-denying, careful, tasteful friendships. Mutual friendships always. I-and-you and, I hope, a third one, out of which perhaps community can grow. Because perhaps here we can find what the good is. [...]

Hospitality was a condition consequent on a good society in politics, *politeia*, and by now might be the *starting point* of *politeia*, of politics. But this is difficult because hospitality requires a threshold over which I can lead you. TV, the Internet, newspapers, the idea of communication, abolished the walls between “inside” and “outside”, and therefore also the friendship, the possibility of leading somebody over the door. Hospitality requires a table around which you can sit and if people get tired they can sleep. You have to belong to a subculture to say, we have a few mattresses here. [...] I do think that if I had to choose one word to which hope can be tied, it is hospitality. A practice of hospitality recovering threshold, table, patience, listening, and from there generating seedbeds for virtue and friendship on the one hand. On the other hand, radiating out for possible community, for rebirth of community.

from ['The Cultivation of Conspiracy'](#) (1998)

On the occasion of his receiving the City of Bremen's Culture and Peace Prize, Illich gave a talk which looked back on the various “thinkeries” he had created with friends during different seasons of his life, as an antidote to the “conditioned air” of institutions. Among them, the household his friends set up, where he would stay during the semesters when he came as a visiting professor to the city.

Even before my first Bremen semester could start, Barbara Duden got a house in the Ostertor Viertel, beyond the old moat, just down from the drug-corner, the farmers market and the Turkish quarter. There Barbara created an ambiance of austere playfulness. The house became a place that at the drop of a hat

accommodates our guests. If – after my lecture on Fridays – the spaghetti bowl must feed more than the two dozen who fit around the table made from flooring timber, guests squat on Mexican blankets in the next room.

Over the years our “Kreftingstraße” has fostered privileged closeness in respectful, disciplined, critical intercourse: friendships between old acquaintances who drop in from far away, and new ones, three, even four decades younger than my oldest companion Ceslaus Hoinacki, who shares his room with our Encyclopedias.

Friendship makes ties unique, but some more than others bear the burden of the host. Cassandra who lives elsewhere, has a key to the house and brings the flowers and Matthias, the virtuoso drummer who stays downstairs, in the room that opens on the tiny garden, belong to the dozen who can equally welcome the newcomer at the threshold, stir the soup, orient conversation, do the dishes and ... correct my manuscripts as well as those of each other.

Learned and leisurely hospitality is the only antidote to the stance of deadly cleverness that is acquired in the professional pursuit of objectively secured knowledge. I remain certain that the quest for truth cannot thrive outside the nourishment of mutual trust flowering into a commitment to friendship. Therefore I have tried to identify the climate that fosters and the “conditioned air” that hinders the growth of friendship.

from [‘Speed? What Speed?’](#)

I have tried to live as a pilgrim, taking one step after another, entering into my time, living within my horizon, which I hope to reach with the step, the surprising step I take to die.

Declaration on Soil (1990)

The ecological discourse about planet Earth, global hunger, threats to life, urges us to look down at the soil, humbly, as philosophers. We stand on *soil*, not on Earth. From soil we come, and to the soil we bequeath our excrement and remains. And yet soil — its cultivation and our bondage to it — is remarkably absent from those things clarified by philosophy in our Western tradition.

As philosophers, we search beneath our feet because our generation has lost its grounding in both soil and virtue. By virtue, we mean that shape, order and direction of action informed by tradition, bounded by place, and qualified by choices made within the habitual reach of the actor; we mean practice mutually recognized as being good within a shared local culture which enhances the memories of a place.

We note that such virtue is traditionally found in labor, craft, dwelling and suffering supported, not by an abstract earth, environment or energy system, but by the particular soil these very actions have enriched with their traces. And yet, in spite of this ultimate bond between soil and being, soil and the good, philosophy has not brought forth the concepts which would allow us to relate virtue to common soil, something vastly different from managing behavior on a shared planet.

We were torn from the bonds to soil — the connections which limited action, making practical virtue possible — when modernisation insulated us from plain dirt, from toil, flesh, soil and grave. The economy into which we have been absorbed — some willy-nilly, some at great cost — transforms people into interchangeable morsels of population, ruled by the laws of scarcity.

Commons and homes are barely imaginable to persons hooked on public utilities and garaged in furnished cubicles. Bread is a mere foodstuff, if not calories or roughage. To speak of friendship, religion and joint suffering as a style of conviviality — after the soil has been poisoned and cemented over — appears like academic dreaming to people randomly scattered in vehicles, offices, prisons and hotels.

As philosophers, we emphasize the duty to speak about soil. For Plato, Aristotle and Galen it could be taken for granted; not so today. Soil on which culture can grow

and corn be cultivated is lost from view when it is defined as a complex subsystem, sector, resource, problem or “farm” — as agricultural science tends to do.

As philosophers, we offer resistance to those ecological experts who preach respect for science, but foster neglect for historical tradition, local flair and the earthy virtue, self-limitation.

Sadly, but without nostalgia, we acknowledge the pastness of the past. With diffidence, then, we attempt to share what we see: some results of the earth’s having lost its soil. And we are irked by the neglect for soil in the discourse carried on among boardroom ecologists. But we are also critical of many among well-meaning romantics, Luddites and mystics who exalt soil, making it the matrix, not of virtue, but of life. Therefore, we issue a call for a philosophy of soil: a clear, disciplined analysis of that experience and memory of soil without which neither virtue nor some new kind of subsistence can be.

Biographical details

Illich is hard to summarise, but here are two alternative versions of a short biography that you could use, if you want to, as part of an invitation. Feel free to edit these as needed.

Shorter version

Ivan Illich (1926-2002) was a man around whom myths seem to gather, while labels won't stick.

For much of the 1970s, it's said that he could "draw more people than Bob Dylan to any university campus". In books such as *Deschooling Society* and *Tools for Conviviality*, he brought the shadow side of modern institutions into question. His early drafts appeared in the *New York Review of Books* and on the front page of *Le Monde*, he was courted by world leaders from Pierre Trudeau to Indira Gandhi and in dialogue with everyone from Foucault to Krishnamurti.

But he outlived the years of his fame and went on gathering circles of friends on multiple continents, working in multiple languages, in a deepening enquiry into the hidden assumptions on which industrial modernity is founded. He died peacefully during a nap at Barbara Duden's house in Bremen on 2 December 2002.

More than a decade later, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben suggested that Illich was finally approaching his "hour of legibility". In the year of his centenary, Illich continues to be a lively influence on thought and action in a multitude of contexts.

Longer version

Ivan Illich was a mercurial figure, straddling identities; a man around whom myths gather, while labels refuse to stick. Born in Vienna in 1926, raised between there and his grandfather's home on the Dalmatian coast, he was a teenager when his family had to flee the Nazis. In adult life, he spoke for the virtues of grounding in a

‘particular soil’ and ‘a shared local culture’, yet recognised that his own destiny was to live as ‘a wandering Jew and a Christian pilgrim’.

As a Catholic priest in the 1950s and 60s, he defended the syncretic local forms of faith he found in Latin America against the forces of the Vatican and modernising development programmes, and created a remarkable language school, think tank and free university at the Centre for Intercultural Documentation in Cuernavaca, Mexico.

As a prominent public intellectual in the 1970s, his wanderings took him around the world and into numerous fields, sparking international debates around education, energy and medicine, shaping the movements of environmentalism and appropriate technology, critical development studies and degrowth, and working closely with activists from Gustavo Esteva to John McKnight.

He outlived the years of his fame and went on gathering with friends to collaborate on a deepening historical enquiry into the assumptions on which economic modernity was founded, and he died peacefully during a nap at his friend Barbara Duden’s house in Bremen in December 2002.

Two decades later, his work continues to light a flame in the dark for philosophers and theologians, hackers and technology critics, farmers and Indigenous activists, and to provide illumination for many movements and projects.

- Read more about some of the projects and collaborations inspired by Illich:
<https://dougald.substack.com/p/the-illich-archipelago>