



SERENDIPITY

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“To Hell With Good Intentions” Revisited

By Ligaya Beebe
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Part of VIA's orientation process includes a reading and discussion of Ivan Illich's "To Hell With Good Intentions." Illich's essay was delivered as a speech at the Conference of InterAmerican Student Projects (CIASP) in Mexico in 1968.

Illich asks these young volunteers to throw aside any intentions they have of "doing good" or "helping" the communities they'll be living with. His argument goes: you know nothing except your middle-class American background and you do not speak the language. Therefore, the only local people you'll be able to relate to are the privileged elite who can speak English anyway. He argues that if young people want to affect actual change they ought to stay in their own communities: "If you have any responsibility at all, stay with your riots here at home. Work for the coming elections: you will know what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how to communicate with those to whom you speak... If you insist on working with the poor... then at least work among the poor who can tell you to go hell."

Illich ends his piece by challenging the volunteers to recognize their powerlessness, to go to Mexico anyway, but to recognize that they're students, takers, and money-spenders rather than teachers or providers.

The discussion I had with other in-coming vols during orientation was pretty tame compared to Illich's fiery rhetoric. I think we all kind of meekly agreed with Illich's main point. I'm pretty sure I said something like, "Yes, well, I recognize that part of my motivations for joining VIA are selfish. I want to learn about China. I want to learn Chinese. That's fine. I'm not expecting to make huge change." I'm pretty sure somebody said something like, "Yes, we're all part of this American cultural imperialism project. We're all privileged, but as long as we're aware of the privilege we carry we won't be like those jerks in CIASP or Peace Corps."

Now, half way through my second year as a VIA vol, I'd like to take this opportunity to reflect on my initial reactions to the Illich piece.

First, I think Illich's message is still timely. There is danger in imposing American benevolence. There is danger in believing that we can make substantial change during our short time in our adopted community. Many if not most of the positive outcomes of our VIA tenure will be personal, for ourselves, selfish even.

However, VIA's mission is not to install emissaries of American benevolence. VIA's mission, and this is crucial, is to increase understanding between the US and Asia through cultural exchange. Illich would probably tell me that real cultural exchange is impossible because



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i) my American middle-class background prevents me from making real connections with local people and ii) I do not have real fluency in Chinese language.

To Mr. Illich I would reply, “Sir, I have made real connections with people here. Many of them are my colleagues or college students. The fact that my friends can speak English and come out of university backgrounds does mean they’re privileged, but it does not mean that our connections are untrue or irrelevant. In the spirit of true cultural exchange we have learned from each other. We have struggled to understand each other through our own cultural lenses, and we have emerged with a fuller, more nuanced understanding of what it means to be American (or Han Chinese or Tibetan).”

Illich’s piece also raises an important issue about race. He argues that the enormous gulf between American volunteers and the communities they work in is exacerbated by the phenotypes imprinted on our skin color. There is privilege in being white, I’m not going to argue against that. Illich’s argument was more impressive in 1968 when most of America’s volunteers were white males. I don’t know the specifics of VIA’s racial demographics in the 1960’s, but as VIA started as a program for men at Stanford the white male majority probably applied. Today, however, the demographics for international volunteerism are different. There are more women in the field. Also, there are more American minorities in the field. Just as a snapshot, the VIA China 08-09 cohort includes: one Hungarian-American, one Japanese-American, one Korean-American, one Chinese-Italian, three Chinese-Americans, one Filipino-American, and three, to borrow Illich’s phrase, “white Americans.” All but two are women.

Illich also argues that even if volunteers are not white Americans they are still “cultural white Americans.”

To Mr. Illich I would reply, “No offense, sir, but you are seriously mistaken in presenting Americans as a homogenous cultural unit. Claiming we are all “culturally white” completely glosses over our distinct cultural differences. Moreover, it is a mistake to presume that “white Americans” are a non-heterogeneous group. Part of what makes America special is that we are a nation of immigrants. Part of what makes VIA special is that we represent America as it truly is: a racially and culturally diverse, polyglot mish-mash.”



China volunteers during in-country orientation watching the Opening Ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics with their Chinese Exchange Partners

VIA CHINA POSTS FOR 2009-2010

BEIJING UNIVERSITY OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY/ZIGEN
MIGRANT WORKERS CENTER (ET/ER), Beijing (NEW!)

SNOWLAND SERVICE GROUP/ENGLISH TRAINING PROGRAM (ET/
ER), Xining, Qinghai Province (NEW!)

GUYUAN NUMBER ONE MIDDLE SCHOOL (ET), Ningxia Hui
Autonomous Region

QINGHAI NORMAL UNIVERSITY/ENGLISH TRAINING PROGRAM
(ET/ER), Xining, Qinghai Province

QINGHAI NORMAL UNIVERSITY/SHEM (ET/ER), Xining, Qinghai
Province

CHUNGBA VALLEY MIDDLE SCHOOL (ET), Chungba Valley, Sichuan
Province (NEW!)

EASTERN TIBET TRAINING INSTITUTE (ET/ER), Zhongdian, Yunnan
Province (NEW!)

GUANGZHOU ENGLISH TRAINING CENTER FOR THE
HANDICAPPED (ET), Guangzhou, Guangdong Province

OUYANG YU EXPERIMENTAL SCHOOL (ET), Xintang Town, Hunan
Province

HEHAI UNIVERSITY/AMITY FOUNDATION (ET/ER), Nanjing, Jiangsu
Province

Finally, to address Illich’s call for powerlessness, I do believe it’s important to recognize our self-serving motives for joining VIA. I think we all recognized this during our application process and definitely during Spring-O when we were hammering out our thoughts on Illich’s essay. However, I do believe that I’ve affected positive change during my short time in China.

I think Illich’s problem with the intention to “do good” is that “doing good” is often equated with grandiose ideas of Progress. Progress, as Illich knew it, is married to the glorious march forth of nation-states on their infallible quests upward through modernization. This capital P Progress is closely tied to the American cultural imperialism Illich warns us about.

In dealing with the question “Do you believe in progress?” a professor of mine said, “I don’t believe in capital P Progress, but I have to believe in little p progress. Otherwise, what would be the point?”

The positive change I’ve affected belongs to little p progress. I don’t have to believe in it, because I can see it. I can see it when a student says, “Beebe, all of our teachers tell us to work together, but you’re the only one who’s actually given us opportunities to work together.” I can see it when a proposal I’ve worked on gets funded and a student implements her first development project in her home village.

For these reasons, I’d say to Mr. Illich, “Sir, I have to believe in good intentions.”