

Health (After a meeting on the question "Verzicht auf Gesundheit?" ["Renounce Health?"] held in Worpswede and Neu-Eichenberg/Hebenshausen, Germany, sponsored by the Niedersachsen Foundation, some of the participants drew up the following statement.)

I, along with others, make the following statement:

I don't want to be part of anything having to do with health if health means

- that I have to turn myself into a morsel in a population through statistical averaging and statistical thinking,
- that I have to turn myself into a bottomless receptacle for diseases in the context of a scientific competition for progress,
- that, through the institutionalization of caring, I have to make myself into a project that requires me to be a never-ending human resource,
- that I become a means for the maintenance of jobs,
- that I must identify myself as a body-less and soul-less function in relation to complex systems,
- if whatever I am supposed to lack or which I am supposed to "have" immediately becomes a driver of an exponentially growing service sector.

After all, I have nothing against being healthy.

In making this statement, I insist that:

- this is not a call for undoing all technical knowledge and practice,
- this is not a call for not appealing for assistance to those who are technically skilled,
- this is not a call for attributing responsibility for well-being to the individual or the individual and a small group of associates,
- this is not a call for the radical decentralization of the provision of assistance to those who need it,
- this is not an endorsement of the proliferation of so-called alternative therapeutic modalities,
- this is not an opposition to research that seeks to demystify "life" and "health," that undertakes analyses of events through which the borders between health and other social and economic sectors becomes fuzzy, that makes previously privileged expert knowledge more widely available, that makes the effects of medical care sensible, i.e., available to the senses, common and otherwise.

From Ivan Illich, "Life, Death, and the Boundaries of the Person: Brave New Biocracy--Health Care from Womb to Tomb," *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Winter, 1994: 4-12.

9- "Health" as function, process, mode of communication; health as an orienting behavior which requires management—these belong with those post-industrial conjuring formulas which suggestively connote much but denote nothing that can be grasped....

The situation is similar with responsibility, although to demonstrate this is much more difficult. In a world which worships an ontology of systems, ethical responsibility is reduced to a legitimizing formality. The poisoning of the world is not the result of an irresponsible decision, but rather our individual presence, as when traveling by airplane or commuting on the freeway, in an unjustifiable world of interconnections. It would be politically naive, after health and responsibility have been made technically impossible, to somehow resurrect them through inclusion in a personal project; some kind of resistance is demanded....

To demand that our children feel well in the world which we have left them is an insult of their dignity. Then to impose on them responsibility for their own health is to add baseness to the insult.

10- In order to live today, I must decisively renounce health and responsibility. Renounce, I say, not ignore or become resigned. I do not use the word to denote indifference. What I mean is that I must accept powerlessness, mourn that which is gone and renounce the irrecoverable.

Renunciation can free one from the powerlessness that robs me of my awareness. But renunciation is not a familiar concept today. We no longer have a word for courageous, disciplined, self-critical renunciation accomplished in community—but that is what I am talking about. I will call it *askesis*.

11- What I want to call *epistemological askesis* opens the path toward renouncing those axiomatic certainties on which the contemporary world view rests. I speak of convivial and critically practiced discipline. The so-called values of health and responsibility belong to these certainties. Examined in depth, one sees them as deeply sickening, disorienting phenomena. That is why I regard a call to take responsibility for my health as senseless, misleading, indecent, and, in a very particular way, blasphemous....

I appeal to the actual experiences of people, to the sensibleness of the ordinary person, in direct opposition to professional diagnosis and judgement. I appeal to people's memories, in opposition to the illusion of progress. Let us look at the conditions of our households and communities, not at the quality of "health care" delivery; health is not a deliverable commodity and care does not come out of a system.

I demand certain liberties for those who would celebrate living rather than preserve "life":

- the liberty to declare myself sick;
- the liberty to refuse any and all medical treatment at any time;
- the liberty to take any drug or treatment of my own choosing;
- the liberty to be treated by the person of my choice, that is, by anyone in the community who feels called to the practice of healing, whether the person be an acupuncturist, a homeopathic physician, a neurosurgeon, an astrologer, a witch doctor or someone else;
- the liberty to die without diagnosis.

I do not believe that countries need a national "health" policy, something given to their citizens. Rather, the latter need the courageous virtue to face certain truths:

- we will never eliminate pain;
- we will not cure all disorders;
- we will certainly die.

Therefore, as sensible creatures, we must face the fact that the pursuit of health may be a sickening disorder....

12- I invite all to shift their gaze, their thoughts, from worrying about health care to cultivating the art of living. And today, with equal importance, to the art of suffering, the art of dying.