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February 1, 1986 (letter 9)

Dear Colleague:

"We" implies "they". A result of using this pair of pronouns incessantly is group solidarity--a warm communal feeling. By contrast, "I" implies other "I"s--all the other "I"s in the world, all the other human beings who can also say "I." In short, "I" implies universality and perhaps also a rather cool notion of human brotherhood. When we say "we" or "it is so that...", we sound authoritative and objective; in fact we may only be opinionated and parochial. On the other hand, when we use "I", although we are being personal and offering a subjective view, the recognition of this fact elevates that individual view to a plane where it can be compared, impartially, with the views of all the other "I"s. In the Western world the use of "I" became increasingly frequent from the late 16th century onward. (Some say that the popularity of the mirror has had an influence.) "Methinks" became "I think". This change, far from turning Westerners into impenetrable egotists, in fact helped to transform them into less dogmatic, more tentative and tolerant individuals, freed--to the extent that this is possible--from the invidious support of Plato's Great Beast--the "we."

Now that I am legally old (55), let me remember this: In old age, don't become a character. Try to remain a personality. What we call a character--a sweet old man or a doddering old fool--is the result of a thinning of personality. As we age, we lose (alas) not only our hair but facets of our once complex nature.

Here is something from Borges that I like. He was talking about death threats from the secret police in Argentina. "Well, really, all death threats are stupid and ridiculous. In what way can one be threatened other than with death? It would be truly clever or original to threaten someone with immortality." (Twenty-Four Conversations with Borges, interviews by Roberto Alifano, 1981-83).

Christian theology tells us that pride is the greatest sin. However, Christian casuistry tells us that pride also has an important use--it is the sort of poison that can kill lesser sins. Thus a proud person would much rather build up than tear down another's reputation for perhaps no better reason than that the former undertaking is far more difficult; likewise, he will threaten someone not with death but with life.

The prospect of being threatened with more life makes many of us shudder. Life is so often unacceptable that we do our best to kill it--we kill time (the life span that is allotted to us) with drugs, alcohol, violent sex, and trivia games.

Why isn't cruelty one of the seven deadly sins? "The word atrocity, as a term for condemning the cruel and heinous conduct of a people, hardly seems to have existed in English before the late eighteenth century." (John U. Nef, Cultural Foundations of the Industrial Revolution, p. 76)

Best wishes,

Y. L.