

February 1, 1988 (vol. 3, no. 11)

Dear Colleague:

Einstein is one of the world's great individualists. He finds even the military band intolerable. How can any sane person want to march in rank and file to the strains of a band? His advice to the new Ph.D. is to spend the next two years alone in a lighthouse and think. And yet one of the most eloquent evocations of the "We" comes from Einstein. In 1952, at the grave of a physicist friend, he says:

Brief is this existence, as a fleeting visit in a strange house. The path to be pursued is poorly lit by a flickering consciousness, the center of which is the limiting and separating "I".

The limitation to the I is for the likes of our nature unthinkable, considering both our naked existence and our deeper feeling for life. The I leads to the Thou and to the We--a step which alone makes us what are. And yet the bridge which leads from the I to the Thou is subtle and uncertain, as is life's entire adventure.

What is this We? Fritz Stern thinks that Einstein has in mind the Berlin Academy of Science, during the golden years of the early 'twenties. At the Academy and the University, Einstein has as colleagues Max Planck, Max von Laue, Fritz Haber, Walter Nernst, and other luminaries. But they were more than colleagues, they were close friends who freely expressed affection for each other. We now talk, perhaps rather loosely, of the exchange of ideas among colleagues. At a still more superficial level, we think of organizing an interdisciplinary symposium during which bright ideas will be aired and exchanged and somehow synthesized into a new creation that will astonish the world. Often, however, the ideas thus aired and exchanged are not worth much, even to their proponents. If one is deeply serious about an idea, one hesitates to expose it to uncomprehending and cynical eyes. That idea is almost a part of one's innermost being. Only to friends, who also happen to be fellow scholars and scientists, is it possible to say what one really thinks--one's deepest doubts and aspirations about a subject. So we now know why a "center of creativity" is so difficult to establish. You need not only a net of fine minds, but a nest of human individuals who are genuinely fond of each other. And that's the miraculous We Einstein has known and misses. (Stern, Dreams and Delusions, p. 46).

Best wishes,

