

In Those Years

By Adrienne Rich

In those years, people will say, we lost track
of the meaning of we, of you
we found ourselves
reduced to I
and the whole thing became
silly, ironic, terrible:
we were trying to live a personal life
and yes, that was the only life
we could bear witness to

But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
into our personal weather
They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
along the shore, through the rags of fog
where we stood, saying I

This poem's central message haunts me – the relationship between ourselves – the I – and the larger world in which we live – the We. It is the tension between what is called our private persona and our public persona, and it seems to me to be the central question of our time. It is what pulls me to do the work I do, and it is fundamentally an issue of moral conscience. Where does the moral conscience of the community lie, if it does not first lie within each of us?

Yet we live in a world where far too many are what the German novelist Herman Broch in the '30s called "Sleepwalkers," in which a whole society was in denial, and at risk of totalitarianism and holocaust that in fact became the case. I believe the world today is precariously balanced between precipitous decline, and the potential for the resolution of major social dilemmas. I read this poem, to myself and others, because it makes dramatically clear that there is no escaping the absolute need to become engaged in community, however one wishes to define community. Peace of mind is an illusion unless we rise to face and fight for what we believe is right. Some things are simply not permitted and the moral law within us knows that, and we know that. It is why so many people strive mightily to make the world a better place.

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