

The Great 'I Am'

Written by Margaret Evans



When the early 20th century English writer/philosopher G.K. Chesterton was invited by *The Times*

newspaper to join several other prominent thinkers in answering the question, "What is wrong with the world?" his essay took the form of a brief letter:

Dear Sirs,

I am.

Sincerely yours,

G.K. Chesterton

Far from the false modesty we see a lot of, today – that wasn't Chesterton's style! – his words simply reflect a deep, almost uncanny, understanding of human nature... a refreshing recognition that sin favors no political party, no ideology, no nationality, or gender, or religion, but makes its stinky, nasty little home in every human heart, no exceptions. Had Chesterton been a different kind of writer altogether, he might have answered the question with the words, "We are." That answer would have been true enough, but it wouldn't have gone *far* enough for the joyfully provocative but ever-humble Chesterton, who looked upon his own heart as his primary laboratory. He would later elaborate on his point, saying, "What embitters the world is not an excess of criticism, but an absence of self-criticism."

While following our latest “national conversation,” I’ve been thinking about Chesterton and wishing he were still with us. I’m not sure our conversation is doing us much good, you see, and I’m convinced Chesterton could help. Or at least help us understand *why*.

In the extended wake of the tragic shootings in Tucson, we seem to have adopted a rather uncomfortable... politesse. A somewhat guarded, almost resentful gentility. Oh, we weren’t that way at first, of course. At first, we were pointing fingers and covering our respective derrieres, frantically scanning Jared Loughner’s reading list in desperate hopes that he was one of the “other guys,” not one of us. “He likes *The Communist Manifesto*!” cried the Right. “But he also likes *Mein Kampf*!” cried the Left. As if either of these details proved anything. (In the interest of full disclosure, I must confess that Loughner and I share an affection for *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

I still don’t know quite what to make of that.) But now, ever since President Obama’s inspiring speech at the Tucson memorial service, we’re being a bit more delicate. (At least, we were as of this writing.) We’re talking like grown-ups, now, about the “climate of hate”

we’ve

established... the “toxic rhetoric”

we

use... the way

we

treat

our

political opponents as enemies. We’re pussy-footing around the blame game deftly... ostensibly refusing to play.

And yet, while it’s nice that we’ve stopped saying “they” and started saying “we,” one can’t shake the feeling that it’s not the “royal we” (meaning “I”) that’s being employed in most cases. In fact, one can’t help hearing a distinct echo of “they” in that “we.” From both the Right and the Left, one senses a shift in language, but not so much a shift in attitude. One wonders just how much genuine, Chesterton-style “self-criticism” is really going on here.

Then there are those who don't even pretend to engage in self-criticism. Sarah Palin finally broke her uncharacteristic silence last week with a video statement defending herself against accusations that she – and her “tone” – might, in some way, be responsible for the shootings. It was a reasonable enough statement – I certainly agree with her that she's not to blame for what happened in Arizona – but would it have killed her to show an ounce of humility? To admit that maybe, just maybe, the rhetoric *has* gotten a bit too heated? That maybe her critics aren't 100% wrong? She had an opportunity, in that statement, to rise above the frequent pettiness of those critics by acknowledging the possibility that their concerns might have legitimacy. Instead, she just gave them more ammunition. (No pun intended, I swear!) This was eminently predictable, but I was secretly hoping for a January surprise.

Even the presumably more enlightened among us seem blind to their own... well, blind spots. I watched the Tucson memorial service on MSNBC, and when it ended, the network went straight to the Rachel Maddow show. Maddow – one of TV's most outspoken proponents of “raising the tone of our discourse” – began by naming the dignitaries at the ceremony as the camera panned over their faces... then informed us, *apropos of nothing*, that “Speaker of the House John Boehner did not attend the memorial service. He stayed in Washington to host a cocktail party.” Bam. Immediately, the uplifting, healing, “we're all in this together” mood of the evening was shattered and we were back to politics as usual. My heart sank. There are more ways than one to fuel a “climate of hate,” and she'd just thrown another log on the fire. No grace period *whatsoever*

. But, you know what? I don't think it would ever occur to Rachel Maddow – who truly does, I believe, mean well – that she had acted in bad faith. In that way, she's a lot like Sarah Palin. Weird, huh?

But to a certain extent, we all are.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen wrote: “I think I am justified – though, where so many hours have been spent in convincing myself that I am right, is there not some reason to fear I may be wrong?”

Austen put those words in the mouth of one Colonel Brandon, a quietly heroic character who rarely utters a syllable without first searching his soul for purity of motive. They are words I come back to a lot, these days, especially when trying to determine where I stand on a certain issue... or why I respond the way I do to a particular situation. Often, I end up right where I started – thinking I’m justified. But sometimes... sometimes a little extra self-scrutiny leads me to a very different conclusion. Sometimes, I find out I’ve been... not quite right about something. Maybe even wrong.

It seems to me that if we’re really serious about this “national conversation” business – if we actually hope to accomplish something like consensus, or at least mutual understanding – we each have to step up and claim our *stuff*, recognize our own blind spots and preferences and prejudices... not just everybody else’s. We have to be willing to say, “I am,” sometimes, when wondering what’s wrong with the world.

When we keep that answer ever in mind – that great “I am” – we can enter the debate with honesty and joy, as happy warriors. (That term will now be out of favor, I suppose. Too bad. I like it.). We can join the conversation with passion and conviction, but also humility, humor and authentic good will. I’ll take that over simmering, parsimonious, passive-aggressive “civility” any day of the week.

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Chesterton would have, too.

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