

ICONS OLD AND NEW

HOLDEN CAULFIELD IS GONE. YOU MAY NOT HAVE KNOWN HIM

personally, but he had a hand in the growing up of quite a few of us. With the passing of J. D. Salinger, American letters lost its icon of disaffection.

by Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón



Holden Caulfield, weary of pretense at the age of 17 became a generation's logo for alienation and rebellion.

But Holden has held sway well beyond the 1950s, when *The Catcher in the Rye* created a stir with its spiced language and finger pointing at the adult generation. *Catcher* has sold 65 million copies, translated into almost every major language in the world.

Holden didn't always see clearly and he wore his alienation as a shield. "Growing up" didn't strike him as a viable pursuit, and down under his cynicism, Holden probably feared entry into the world of adults, a world of "phonies" and "hypocrites" as he saw it. In his dream, he is the "catcher" in a golden field of rye, saving little children from dropping off a cliff. For Salinger, holding onto innocence and integrity was critical.

Each day I have the good fortune to mingle with Holden Caulfield's offspring, you might call them. They aren't nearly as cynical as their forebear, but they certainly do share his quest to find authenticity, in themselves and the world around them. But they are surrounded—and confounded—by the world that awaits. To be honest, I am too at times. I find myself at a loss to justify the behavior of the adults who are stewards of the world they will inherit.

Salinger feared the suffocation of polite conformity. But the picture presented by the adults in charge today is loud and hyperpartisan. It is, at times, even intellectually dishonest, which is to say that facts don't matter and a single viewpoint is paramount. If you cannot—or will not—respect another's point of view, it follows that you must expend a fearful degree of energy protecting your own.

Today's healthcare debate, by example, is the stuff of Holden Caulfield's nightmares. We have taken an issue of elemental human dignity and gridlocked it in political machinations. Notwithstanding the complexity of the challenge, it should be noted that children in sandboxes behave with more generosity.

I have repeated conversations with students, thoughtful young people who are sorely distressed by what they see. Can you imagine the response of our Haitian students when military transport of critically injured victims to American hospitals was suspended for several days? The explanations do not suffice.

This is a critical time for our country. In the face of enormous and powerful changes in the world, we stand in frozen argument, regardless of the subject matter or the consequences. While China builds wind turbines and explores renewable green energy, the U.S. finds it more and more difficult to make a forward thinking decision. It is a critical time because our young people are watching and wondering if such an environment is worth their precious time and energy. We are presenting them with a curriculum that can, indeed, prepare them for a complex and demanding world. They are asked to master not only core skills in science, technology and mathematics, but also to understand a global environment that is closer with each click of a mouse.

We are preparing them to engage, to care about their communities and participate in the life of the nation. And they are ready, the new icons of enthusiasm and optimism. But they are not without their reservations, for they also see quite clearly what Holden Caulfield saw, a world of contradictions and hypocrisies, a dispiriting cynicism. Rest assured, they are vulnerable and we need to ensure that this is not their fate.

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