



In a dark time the eye begins to see.
- Theodore Roethke



GENERATIONS OF ANGST AND APATHY

"I don't know what I am, Dad, and I don't particular care."

— Benjamin Braddock
"The Graduate"
by Charles Webb (1963)

Young Ben Braddock, as portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in the film version of "The Graduate," spoke for a disillusioned generation of baby boomers in early maturity. Later that spiritual emptiness would gorge on frenzied materialism, but for a short period a large number of primarily affluent young Americans attempted to combat cultural nihilism with experiments toward a moral republic which was to be lightly governed for the benefit of all by persons of intelligent goodwill.

These masses of young people were drawn together in the 1960s by their antipathy for the Viet Nam War (and a few by the earlier Civil Rights Movement) and attempted to restructure their society, which was interminably involved in a psychopathic war of nerves with the Soviet Union.

The young Americans turned to animistic socialism and developed a political philosophy that loosely resembled gypsy law. They thought they could bind state socialism and social control with a tribal sense of individual freedom.

Reality, which in some respects means that all dreams take time for fruition and are modified by reality, disillusioned the young once more. Most of them softened their resistance to the 7-11 values of their civilization as they grew older. Communal patterns and politics were abandoned; business networking among the former rebels replaced communalism. The acquisitive, workaholic, well-dined yuppie metamorphosed from the young angst-riven hippy who thought universal love and open sex would make the world a better place.

The colleges and universities the rebellious youth tore apart or opened up (both views are prevalent) with wild curricular insurrection

two decades ago are quietly occupied by their children, who share no less disillusion than their parents had. The difference is that today's disaffected young souls lack hope, which puts a hard edge on their tense bleakness. They defend their sense of futility by pointing to the failure of the youth of the '60s and '70s to change society. If those hundreds of thousands who held mass demonstrations and disrupted the nation's universities failed, what chance has this smaller, less-noticed generation to be successful?

Perhaps that might be why the young today seem so keen on taking for themselves what wealth and pleasure they can out of a culture that appears to be spoiling like an overripe fruit.

"Kids today live with awful nightmares," Abbie Hoffman, "Clown Prince" of the youth rebellion a generation ago told a jury in 1987. (He had been arrested for "trespassing" at the University of Massachusetts while demonstrating against CIA campus recruiting late in 1986. The jury acquitted him.) "AIDs will wipe us out; the polar ice cap will melt; the nuclear bomb will go off any minute. Even the best tend to believe we are helpless to affect matters. It's no wonder teenage suicide is at a record level. Young people are detached from history, the planet, and most important, the future. I maintain to you that this detachment from the future, the lack of hope, and the high suicide rate among youth are connected."

Aside from the usual breathless despair of youth, a reason for the disaffection felt by generations of young Americans might be society's inability to present a sustainable vision for the young to grasp. Such a vision should transcend propaganda and the banalities of popular culture. Real values of life and purpose should be nurtured through the ancient process of schooling.

This is not happening in the United States. Youth are leaving school inadequately prepared, not simply economically but with little

awareness of the underlying basic of their society. Children are not learning although they are passed up through the system. Their parents, an earlier generation of disaffected youth, are dissatisfied with public education and hold it responsible for their children's alienation.

Yet there are some who believe that American education satisfies its intent by producing generations of credit card carrying shoppers.

The existential pain of young whites seems irrelevant to the vigorous appetite for education at any level of quality of their Asian counterparts, first and second generation Americans who will soon outnumber caucasians. These young people are not numbed with futility. They seize their opportunity and score brightest where older breeds of New World trespassers have languished. They overcome the inadequacies of public education and are perhaps confused why their peers embrace despair and Heavy Metal.

The old rebels ought to know that the system of education reflects the values of its culture. What is taught their children is a political decision more concerned with churning out docile consuming masses than with across the board high quality education.

Education has its sinister side after all. The risk of teaching people the techniques of things is that they might think. Thinking does not need education, but without an educated guess of the status of the universe, intelligence is in a vacuum. The educated thoughts of individuals are often at variance with the social molding of public education and prefer change and progress over conformity and stability.

Abbie Hoffman (no relation to Dustin) had it right when he said, "You cannot have change without the young. The young have the creativity, they have the energy, they have the impatience. You need the youth to dissent."

— MICHAEL PAUL McCUSKER