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A Hideout All Their Own

The iPod didn't invent youthful alienation.
It merely perfected it.

"It was in the fig tree, a few years later, that I was first puzzled by the conflict which would haunt me, harm me, and benefit me the rest of my life: simply, the stubborn, relentless, driving desire to be alone as it came into conflict with the desire not to be alone when I wanted not to be." ***—Lillian Hellman***

NO ONE ESCAPES into fig trees anymore. We have iPods for that—or rather our kids do. Existential brooding is a youthful privilege; after a certain age you just have to get on with it.

I'd been searching for that Hellman quote ever since we published our March issue, in which students gave their own reasons for using technology ("What Students Want"; *www.thejournal.com/articles/20336*). Was it for pleasure? For information? For knowledge? None of the above, they said. The story reported, with some earnest hand-wringing, that kids use technology, particularly the iPod, mostly to get away—to seal out the world. To pull a Hellman, as it were.

That's no reason for alarm, or even surprise. The only lesson to draw is that the iPod has not only replaced CD players and Walkmans but fig trees, too. Granted, that might not be an even exchange—there's a lot more poetry to be extracted from a fig tree. It's hard to imagine anyone ever composing such a graceful childhood recollection about curling up with an iPod.



Yet for self-imposed alienation, for a thoughtful retreat, nothing beats an iPod. It was built to nourish teenage angst. It allows you to construct song playlists with names such as "Lost" or "No One Gets Me" and suppose yourself a renegade with no one to turn to. It bids you to wonder about the act of wondering, and to think all the long and dire thoughts of youth. Would that I had had an iPod; it would have made my frequent commiserating with vintage David Bowie a lot easier. *Look out, you rock 'n' rollers. Pretty soon now you're gonna get older*. He was right about that.

Does the iPod, as the article poses, foster reclusive behavior or encourage kids to withdraw? I'd say no. Youth does. Here, the medium is not the message. The message is really this: All the past is future, even now. So allow Hellman her fig tree and today's kids their iPods. They are not so different. They are not antisocial, nor anti-literate, and they are not particularly troubled, disaffected, or burdened. They are not even lonesome. They are just…young. **THE**

—Jeff Weinstock, Executive Editor

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