ENGLISH: IDENTITY AND BELONGING

To The Herald Sun. Attached is my article on identity and belonging. As you asked, I am arguing that "there are costs to the individual in belonging to a group".

Identity and belonging are two essential human values that counter-balance one another. Just like balancing a set of scales, the proportion of identity and of belonging need to be equal in order to avoid imbalance, or the dominance of one over the other. Through J.D. Salinger's exploration of identity and belonging, we witness the protagonist of *"The Catcher in the Rye",* Holden Caulfield, seek life's ultimate desires in both identity and belonging, but refusing to sacrifice one in order to obtain the other. Holden, unlike many, maintains his identity and sense of self, and watches in despair at the phoniness of the adult world, observing many sacrificing their identity in order to belong. There is no doubt that belonging to a group is of great benefit to the individual; however, can belonging also be detrimental to a person's individual identity? Salinger explores society's insistence of conforming in order to belong, which results in the inevitable sacrifice of aspects of one's personal identity.

"The love of a family is life's greatest blessing." Belonging to a family is third on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, only behind physiological and safety necessities. Unconditional love, support and respect are only some of the invaluable qualities acquired through belonging to a family. It is therefore needless to say, belonging to a family is important to each and every individual. In *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield struggles to belong to his family, not being able to trust or confide in them, with the exception of his sister, Phoebe, as well as his dead brother, Allie. This lack of belonging of Caulfield to his family causes him to suffer from a lack of love, support and respect, and a feeling of isolation. *"About all I know is, I sort of miss everybody".* Alternatively, belonging too much to a family can also have consequences to a person's individuality. Although you are guaranteed love and support, being overly attached to your family can leave you focused on meeting the obligations solely to the family, rather than to yourself. A loss of your personal identity- the identity of the family replaces your own. Belonging too little or too much to your family can have serious effects on one's personal identity and therefore a balance must be ascertained, ensuring equilibrium between identity and belonging.

Friends in many ways cannot offer you everything that family can, but they can offer you so much that family can't. A true friend is usually, the same age as you, they can relate to you, they support you through the good and the bad times and they care for you. *"A faithful friend is the medicine of life."* Holden had such a friend, Jane Gallagher. Holden and Jane got on like a house on fire. They understood each other, they were happy together, and most of all, they were comfortable with each other. *"You never even worried, with Jane, whether your hand was sweaty or not. All you knew was, you were happy. You really were."* This friendship however faded when Holden left to Pencey, leaving Holden stranded, friendless. For Holden, a friend like Jane – someone he felt he belonged with- was irreplaceable. His cynical and somewhat lethargic approach to life only came to surface upon not being with Jane. Having no one to confide in or simply have a laugh with, Holden felt alienated and shunned out the world as a result. Not belonging to a friendship group or having a true friend to turn to, cost Holden dearly. Belonging to a friendship group can also have costs to the individual. In order to belong to a friendship group, there are individual aspects of your identity you must compromise in order to conform to the demands of the group. Take Ackley for example. When asked by Holden whether he wants to go to the movies with him, Ackley asked who else was going. Holden told him Mal Brossard was going. Ackley replies with, "*That bastard... All right. Wait a second."* Despite the fact that Ackley considers Mal a 'bastard' – someone he obviously does not want to be with- he decides to go anyway to ensure he is not shunned by Holden, compromising his identity. Life is miserable without friends and Holden's life is a clear example of that; however, belonging to a friendship group also entails certain individual costs you must make, even if it contradicts your own identity. Finding an appropriate friendship group which enables you the benefits friends can offer, while also keeping your individuality – a balance between identity and belonging – is vital to your lifestyle.

Society's insistence on conforming in order to belong severely outweighs that of family and friends. Holden is told that life is a game that one plays according to the rules. He has no option other than to *"play up, play up and play the game".* The demands of society are direct and consistent, where Holden must abide by certain moral standards as well as act his age, something Phoebe insists Holden is not doing. However, the strict demands of society rarely correlate with the demands of friendship groups, as well as your personal preferences and natural instincts. Being a misfit to society is barely an option, as only a world of alienation could possibly result, as evident by Holden. Therefore, we tend to lie a cost against our own beliefs, and our personal identity, as well as group identity; all must give preference to the identity of society. Although Holden's resistance to the temptation to conform to society can be seen as courageous, it also leaves him for the worst, emphasising the fact that aspects of your identity must be forfeited in order to belong.

Conformity is a way of life which is necessary and socially accepted in order to belong. Society demands conformity in every sense and all must abide to its demands or be shunned from it entirely. As Holden notes: *"I'm always saying 'Glad to've met you' to somebody I'm not at all glad to have met. If you want to stay alive you have to say that stuff, though".* Holden, like many before him, seeks both identity and belonging, but his stubborn and naive attitude disallows him to see that in order to achieve such equilibrium, he must give up some of his identity. Attempts have been made to reintegrate Holden with society and although he simply does not function within society, there are subtle hints that Holden begins to see the light at the end of the book. But is belonging and conforming to society really such a good thing? "*One man can change the world".* And with Holden's identity and sense of self still intact, maybe, just maybe, Holden can be that man.