

Teach Children the Truth (or What Columbus Really Did When He Came To America)

The American school system seems to have a habit of teaching propaganda and lies to our school children. Teachers and textbooks writers for children commonly teach a rosy picture of our history. Jeremy Stern, a speaker for National Public Radio's "All Things Considered", summed up this trend when he said, "And they (meaning schools) do want [students] to know all about this great land of ours so they will be patriotic, but they don't want them to learn about the tragedy and pain in it's real history, because then they will be critical. And we will be passively taken over by a foreign power." Especially now, with the threats of the Aryan nation, potential retaliation for unprovoked bombings, and subversive communist activities within the borders of the US in the present day.

If we take a look at the way children are taught about Christopher Columbus in our schools, as opposed to what really happened on Columbus' journeys, we can see that some sort of change needs to be made. Isn't it about time that we started teaching the truth? We need to make an effort to correct the history books used in children's schools despite how patriotic we want our children to be.

Part of the problem in teaching sugar coated versions of historic and current events comes from the desire to propagate the parables of the great American myth addressed in Robert Reich's essay, "An American Morality Tale." By making America's history look pretty compared to other countries, we strengthen the idea of the "mob at the gates."(391) Reich tells us that, "Woodrow Wilson grimly rallied Americans to 'defeat once and for all... the sinister forces that rendered peace impossible'"(392) The mob at the gates is that combination of sinister, evil deeds of "other countries" that we are unafraid of exposing in all their ugliness. That way, our awareness prevents them from bringing "their" ugliness and evil into this country. But, what of the dark and evil things we have done and glossed over like slavery, concentration camps for the Japanese during WWII and the simple brutality, genocide, government sanctioned hate crime and street wars that are still occurring and were occurring during the theft of Native American lands when Europeans "founded" this country. (i.e. the recent forced relocation of 12000 Navajo people to a nuclear dump site in Nevada, begun on Columbus Day 1996, by congress and President Clinton).

A good example of brutality in American history is summed up by what Christopher Columbus did when he arrived on the shore. America was supposedly founded by this "hero" in 1492. When I was in grade school, I learned about Columbus and how great he was. Most of my classmates were disappointed when they learned that Leif Erickson may have arrived here before Columbus. Christopher Columbus was "great" because he set out and "proved" to the world that the Earth was round! He was great because he "discovered" our homeland! Very little was mentioned about what he'd done once he got here, and none of the students in my class questioned what we were taught.

But, it wasn't until my second year of college that I learned that Columbus wasn't a hero or even what could be classified as a good man. In "Columbus and the Discovery of America" by William Davidson, we are given an example of a textbook version of Columbus' voyage. Like

my experience in grade school, no mention is made in this essay of what happened on his last two voyages except that he made them (he made four voyages, not two). No references are made to his relationship with the Native Americans he encountered other than that Columbus took "... with him several natives, whom he called Indians...." on his way back to Spain after his first journey. There, they all died of viruses, maltreatment and illnesses.

In the real world, however, Columbus was just a tad bit more violent and cruel than we are led to believe. He "captured sixteen hundred natives and sent five hundred back to Spain as slaves" (Behrens and Rosen, 240) on his second voyage. He was incapable of governing his new colonies and often used threats of mutilation in his attempt to keep the colonies in order. In "Columbus in the Classroom" Bill Bigelow explains many of the things Columbus actually did: "In his quest for gold, Columbus had the hands cut off any Indian who did not return with his or her three month quota. And what is also true is that, in a mere forty years of Spanish administration, on the island of Hispanola, an entire race of people was wiped off the face of the planet." (two full tribes) Bigelow also says "Columbus' fame should not be limited to the discovery of America: he also deserves credit for initiating the trans-Atlantic slave trade." (257)

It took approximately 500 years for the truth of Columbus' voyages to be accepted by the Christian Church. In 1992, the National Council of Churches finally drew up a resolution stating they acknowledge the truth and that it will "bring forward the silenced interpretation of the 1492 event" as well as advocate "the inclusion of the accurate factual history of indigenous people, including African Americans in textbooks to be used in public and parochial education systems...." ("Resolution of the National Council of Churches," 281) It is surprising and even discouraging that it took so long for this particular truth to be acknowledged publicly. And even this attempt to rectify the problem draws criticism because of "the patronizing manner in which all non-European ... peoples are treated. These people have no role to play in the N.C.C.'s history of European expansion except as passive victims of European aggression"(Muldoon, 284-5)

If the debate about what happened when Columbus arrived has taken this long to rectify itself to some small degree, what other historical events have been coated over with pretty looking deceptions and out and out lies. How many events remain unresolved? It is important to teach our children the truth about our history as well as that of other countries. It is certain that our actions have been downright uncivilized to blatantly sadistic and psychopathic, but I am sure that few countries have managed to set a better example. We carry the ideal of encouraging patriotism in our children a little too far, set the wrong example for truth telling, and send the wrong message when we have to lie to do it.

Song of Solomon 2:12 The flowers appear on earth; the time of singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in the land.

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