





The Myths of American “History”

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HONORS WRITING SEMINAR I

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We as a nation feel it to be acceptable to spoon-feed our children an almost entirely fabricated story of the first Thanksgiving. American students have also been taught that the land now known as the United States was settled in the year 1620. These and many other discrepancies are forced into the sponge-like memory of young children all over the country. Many wonder how these fallacies could have wandered their way into classrooms. Perhaps it was through the ignorance of some historians. Another theory may be that our naïve youth may not be able to recognize that such a grand and powerful nation was in fact established with the help of simple luck. Whatever the reason, the recollection of many adolescents is riddled with these unfortunate errors. Our people should not misinform their own youth. Students should always be taught the truth about the history of their nation. These falsehoods

about the past will surely cause confusion as the students grow in age and wisdom. In her book, *Media Messages: What Film, Television, and Popular Music Teach Us About Race, Class, Gender and Sexual Orientation*, Linda Holtzman suggests one process that might rectify the current American history situation: one she calls Reconstructing Knowledge, which is basically the alteration of previous ideas. She states that by questioning established beliefs and accepting alternate possibilities, one could potentially view society in a totally different manner (15-17). This could be the most powerful tool to bring about social awareness of these contrived stories. Of course, there is always the conventional method: teach it correctly the first time.

In his “The Truth about the First Thanksgiving,” James W. Loewen has already indirectly caused many college stu-

dents to utilize Linda Holtzman’s theory of reconstructing knowledge by persuading them to truly question American history (77-78). He once inquired of the historic knowledge of a sampling of American college students and was confronted with a ghastly truth: these students, who had been taught about their nation for more than half their lives, were completely clueless about it (76). Again, many may ask “WHY?” The answer lies in textbooks and their misinformation. Upon consultation of one such “history” book titled *The American Tradition*, Loewen finds a slightly inaccurate (although quite child-friendly) version of the landing at Plymouth Rock. However, the author completely fails to recognize the existence of “the Plague.” The Black Plague? No, this was an American plague perhaps very similar but far more lethal (77-78). Why would American schools teach students about the horrific pasts of other cultures but not America’s own? Perhaps we don’t want to seem imperfect.

Although the young may be more sensitive than adults, they should always know the truth about history. To give a student such imprecise and (seemingly) contrived ideas is inconceivable. We are speaking of a pupil eager and willing to learn actuality, not fairy tales. Most college students have learned about the Plague in Europe, so why couldn't they name that which rendered this country habitable? One way to correct this deviation from reality is to follow the work in Holtzman's book, which discusses several ways to lead the unenlightened. One method, reconstructing knowledge, seems to be the most feasible option for this situation. By trying this technique, one could theoretically rectify the falsehoods he or she was taught as a child. The reconstruction of historical knowledge could

potentially help those who are ignorant of antiquity and help them understand what really happened.

But why try to reconstruct knowledge when you can surmount the obstacle before it occurs? Why not simply teach young students the truth when they are young so that they will actually remember it? Society apparently feels it to be acceptable to introduce students to graphic images of the Black Plague, the Holocaust, and now the September 11th terrorist attack, so why would the true stories of the first Thanksgiving fare differently? Of course it may be hard to correct "the system," but think of the victims of these fibs and intrigues. Even a slight modification of text-

books could greatly assist the transition from the sugar-coated "facts" of American history we learned as children to the information that as adults we now know to be factual. Our nation's youth believe it to be a fact that our country was settled in 1620 AD, when it was really settled more than 31,000 years before that (Loewen 76). America's educational system should seriously consider this proposition. Most people are very unhappy when they learn they have been deliberately misled. ■

Works Cited

Holtzman, Linda. *Media Messages: What Film, Television, and Popular Music Teach Us About Race, Class, Gender and Sexual Orientation*. Aramok: Sharpe, 2002.

Loewen, James W. *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.

Diversity: The Spice of Life

BY ADAM MUSANTE

HONORS WRITING SEMINAR I

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I grew up in a suburb of New Jersey called West Windsor. It was always a place of constant growth, because its strong school system attracted young parents who wanted to benefit their children. During my childhood, I watched as countless neighbors moved in and out, as older children proceeded on to college and their families moved to towns with less expensive taxes. Most of the town's population were white, either Catholic or Jewish. I noticed this trend remained the same from first grade to fourth grade. It was not until fifth grade that I observed a huge growth in the amount of minorities coming to my town.

West Windsor was infused with a large amount of ethnic groups, such as Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and Pakistani. As a child I was not shy or biased toward any races because my parents helped keep me open minded. They never judged the friends I brought home to hang out with. As long as they were well behaved, my parents never had any problems with the friends I made. The diversity I encountered and the flexibility of my parents continued to grow throughout the years, well into my teenage years.

Some of my very best friends today are Indian and Chinese, and even my girlfriend is Taiwanese. This stemmed from my exposure to cultural diversity as a boy, and I embraced it and have enjoyed it. By

trying different foods and learning about their different lifestyles and traditions, I have experienced the connectivity that Mary Pipher discusses in *The Middle of Everywhere*. Despite our ethnic differences, we found common interests and values among us. We simply have an understanding of each other, and it has paid off in dividends by creating long lasting friendships. ■

Works Cited

Pipher, Mary. *The Middle of Everywhere: The World's Refugees Come to Our Town*. New York: Harcourt Inc., 2002.

