

DEBORAH WORK
Commentary



On our conscience: Columbus was cruel

Pretend you are Christopher Columbus. Describe your travels. Begin with the fact that you had to convince Queen Isabella to give you ships and money to make your journey."

My 7-year-old sits, pencil poised, ready to tackle her class assignment, ready to ponder ol' Chris, whose accomplishments we acknowledge today.

And there she remains, pencil aloft. Finally, she lays it down. "Why did Columbus want to kill the Indians?" she wonders aloud.

A trip to the library and a copy of Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* helps us see the New World, these new people, through Columbus' eyes, having set out from Spain, and now wading to shore on a Bahamian island one early October day in 1492. The Arawaks, tawny and curious about the huge ship, run to greet them.

"They... brought us parrots and balls of cotton and spears and many other things..." I read from Columbus' log. "They willingly traded everything they owned. They do not bear arms... They have no iron. Their spears are made of cane. They would make fine servants. With 50 men we could subjugate them and make them do whatever we want."

My daughter inhales sharply. "Why is Columbus thinking of being mean?" she wants to know.

Equally captivated, I read on. According to Zinn, the Arawaks, much like the Indians on the mainland, were remarkable for their belief in sharing, a trait that did not flourish in the Europe of the Renaissance, dominated as it was by "... the government of kings, the frenzy for money that marked Western civilization."

Gold fever brings slavery

Seems Columbus was interested in one thing: Finding the Asian gold he'd promised Spain's Queen Isabella in exchange for financing his trip.

As we know, he never made it to Asia, reaching the islands of the Caribbean instead, where he was met by the Arawaks, who swam out to greet him.

"They have no horses, no work animals. They wear tiny gold ornaments in their ears," I read from the navigator's log. "The Indians are so naive and so free with their possessions that no one who hasn't witnessed it would believe it. When you ask for something they have, they never say 'no.' To the contrary, they offer to share with anyone."

In the end, the Arawaks are enslaved and worked to death trying to mine for gold. Or they are murdered outright.

Mass suicides are common; mothers kill their babies to save them from slavery. When no gold is found, the Indians are forced to work huge plantations.

A horrible sacrifice

Within two years, half of the 250,000 Indians are dead.

By 1515, perhaps 50,000 are left.

By 1550, there are 500.

In 1650, none of the Arawaks or their descendants are left on the island.

"Oh my," I breathe, forgetting my daughter at my elbow, remembering how powerfully atrocious this act was. The horror on my daughter's face reminds me we are not as mindful, nor have ever been as outraged by this as we ought to be.

Zinn, the historian, shows how we learn to accept the downright unacceptable. How, in respectable classrooms and textbooks across the country, outright lies are not necessarily told, nor facts omitted. It's simply that the truth is spoken too quickly. Fleeting, as it were, giving us the impression that, well, yes, genocide took place but it's not *that* important.

My daughter, though, will be America's conscience. On behalf of us all, she says a prayer today, asking for Native American forgiveness.

"I know I'm sorry that happened to them," she says, all sincerity and pure child. "Maybe, somehow, we can all begin again."

Her prayer: That past hatred become present love.

Deborah Work's column appears on Mondays. Share your comments at her Web page at www.sun-sentinel.com/news/debwork.htm