

THOUGHTS ON TEACHING

Teaching the Truth Is Not Easy

BY BOBBY ANN STARNES

Are you going to talk about Indians?" asked the boy in the front row. "Well, sort of," I said, preoccupied with figuring out how to advance my PowerPoint slides. Then the little red-haired girl started to bounce up and down and wave her arm wildly from side to side. "Ooohh! Ooohh!" she squealed, unable to contain herself. "I'm royalty," she blurted out. "I have royal blood." Her great, great grandmother, she reported, had been a Cherokee princess.

I smiled and nodded. It's amazing how many white people are descended from Cherokee Indian princesses — in spite of the fact that there is not now and never has been any Cherokee royalty. Just another example of the power of the Disney Studios' animation department, I suppose.

Once she opened the door, more than half the class quickly and proudly reported some genetic link to Indians, some even to Sacagawea and Sitting Bull. The number of self-identified Indian "descendants" reminded me that I was in a classroom *east* of the Mississippi River. In off-reservation classrooms in Montana and North and South Dakota — where students were far more likely to be related to Sacagawea and Sitting Bull — children generally don't eagerly proclaim their Native American heritage, whether real or imagined.

But it was November, and November has become a strange month in elementary school classrooms. I first noticed this when I taught 3rd grade on a northern Montana reservation. As a non-Native teacher trying to find ways to make the curriculum relevant to children in a culture and community I did not understand, I found myself confused and frustrated and

in need of re-education. It was hard work every day, but when November came around, teachers dragged out coloring sheets of Indian chiefs and had their children make toothpick tipis and birch bark canoes — for *our* Indian children. And they taught the Thanksgiving story complete with paper-bag Indian vests. It was the strangest thing.

But, on this day, my task was to help children think differently about Native Americans. So I started by asking them if they knew what Indians look like. They assured me that they did and proceeded to describe the perfect stereotypical Plains Indian. I clicked on my first slide. There, for all to see was just the Indian they had described — a proud Lakota warrior.

Teaching the truth about our history raises questions about our national character.

Did they know where Indians live? Oh yes, they knew that too. "In tipis!" they shouted. "You better know this," the teacher threatened. "We just studied this!" That really revved up the response rate. "Wikipedia!" one shouted. "Longhouse!" shouted another. I clicked and a slide appeared showing a beautifully painted Blackfoot tipi. Yes, all agreed. That is where Indians live.

Then onto the next slide. There was a picture of a white woman interviewing a Lakota chief. The chief was dressed in full traditional regalia and the woman was dressed in typical attire from the turn of the century — turn of the *20th* century, that is. "When Indians dressed like the man in this picture, women dressed like her," I explained. "But your teacher and I don't dress like this today. And except on special occasions, Native Americans don't dress like this either. Would you like to see how Native Americans dress today?"

The children leaned forward in their chairs and silence fell over the room. Yes. They wanted to see.

I clicked forward through a series of my students in Montana. The 5th graders were surprised to see children who looked very much like themselves. Next, I showed them pictures of Native American homes on reservations and in cities. And again, they were surprised to learn that Indian children live in homes very much like their own.

After 30 minutes, it was lunch time and my eager audience was lost to the hot dogs and baked beans in

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the cafeteria. As I headed to the parking lot, a wave of bewilderment engulfed me. What in the world is this all about? Why do otherwise well-educated 5th graders think Indians still live in tipis? Why do they believe that if they saw an Indian at the mall, he would be dressed in buckskins and sporting war paint? Why is teaching something approaching the truth about Indians so darned hard? We know the truth and still every November we teach that, as one storybook puts it, “the Pilgrims provided a feast the likes of which the Indians had never seen before.” We know better.

Earlier in November, I’d been talking to elementary school teachers who were “of course, doing Indians this month,” as though it was some kind of absolute rule of teaching. Knowing that I work with teachers on reservations, they wanted to borrow materials that might help them plan their unit. Happy to oblige, I pulled out piles of lessons designed to teach a more complex history of Columbus and the first Thanksgiving, the “settling” of the “wilderness,” and the impact of Manifest Destiny. They assured me that the materials were “interesting,” but they wanted “more positive” stories of the Indians and settlers. Their children, they said, were too young to deal with the more

troubling aspects of real American history. I had nothing to offer. So they returned to the traditional Thanksgiving story. Never mind that they knew it was

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a fabrication. “You know, the children really enjoy it, and it is what they understand,” they said, as though teaching lies would have no consequence.

Teaching the truth is not easy. Maybe it raises too many questions about our national character. Maybe it depresses us to learn about historical injustices. Maybe it’s too raw for the squeamish or those who can feel proud to be American only if our nation is pure and perfect. So, okay, if you can’t, don’t teach the truth. Let it sit silently on the bookshelves and in other safe places. Don’t talk about it. Let it go unsaid. I don’t like it, and I don’t think it’s a good idea, but I do understand it.

But here’s what I don’t understand — really, sincerely, I don’t understand. Why do we feel compelled to teach the lies? I mean, since we can’t bring ourselves to teach the truth about Christopher Columbus, couldn’t we just skip the story altogether? Why teach the lie? If we’re going to teach children that American Indians still live in tipis — if, in fact, we teach our children that Indians still exist at all — couldn’t we just skip the traditional November Indian unit? If we’re going to *continue* to dress children in paper-bag Indian vests and feathered headbands and “re-enact” the Disney-scripted Thanksgiving, couldn’t we at least call it what it is? After all, we do that with Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. And if we’re going to insist that our history be taught to children as if no wrongs were ever done, no mistakes ever made, couldn’t we just stop pretending that truth matters?

Maya Angelou says that when we know better, we do better. And I’ve always wanted to believe that’s true. I teach it to my students, and I try to live it myself. But we know better and *still* we don’t do any better when it comes to teaching our children about our relationships — long ago and today — with Native Americans. It seems there is some moral lesson in that, and if we could find it and act on it, I think *that* would be something to be thankful for next November. ■

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