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Of Truth-Telling and Heroes

The 500th anniversary of the voyages of Christopher Columbus has unleashed a torrent of controversy. Scheduled events include flamboyant parades and celebrations—as well as an “Indigenous People’s Day” in Berkeley, California, whose mayor decries the “brutal realities” resulting from the conquest and destruction of ancient American civilizations. Even the National Council of Churches has gotten into the act, declaring that 1992 should be a time of repentance for a great historical crime.

Adventist teachers have to pick their way carefully through this multicultural minefield. Telling the real Columbus story, like dealing with every other momentous event, calls for a reassessment of some entrenched myths of history. On page 5 of this issue Humberto Rasi offers new insights into the story of Columbus.

The brouhaha over Columbus’ rightful place in history leads us to ask what students ought to learn about history in general. Beginning on page 19, Joan Francis provides a helpful perspective on the teaching of world history to college students.

While many people agree that schools ought to provide some information about the cultures and daily lives of forgotten peoples, they most decidedly do not agree on how the new facts should be interpreted. Are we to throw out the writings of “dead white males” that have formed the basis of Western civilization? Should we replace the traditional Eurocentric curriculum with one that is Afrocentric, feminist, or multicultural—or try to combine these often-antagonistic world views? As we seek solutions to these dilemmas, we must first of all value truth-telling. We need to help our students understand the debate and the reasons why it is being waged so passionately. This offers Adventist teachers a superb opportunity to apply the principles of the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy to the discussion of social studies and literature.

With the United States and other nations becoming more racially and culturally diverse, we must teach our students about other peoples and cultures. This will help them appreciate these people’s contributions to civilization and their struggles for freedom and dignity.

However, we must not gloss over the inequities and cruelties that occur in every civilization as the result of sin. We must also decry the abuses that grow from a wrong interpretation of Scripture—embracing of racism and sexism, Manifest Destiny, unrestrained capitalism, and the supposedly God-given right to pillage the earth.

Adventist teachers need to inform themselves about the new scholarship and share it with their students. But we must do more than summarize trends and research. We must enable our students to use conflicting sources of information to arrive at sound judgments. We must help them not only to understand, but also to commit themselves to being peacemakers, to shed their prejudices and go forth to make the world a better place. Dorothy Eaton Watts’ article on page 16 presents some ideas that relate multicultural education and global mission.

Through teaching and example, we can help our students appreciate diversity—not only in faraway times and places, but also in their own neighborhoods and dormitories. This will help them develop the skills to live with others in this world and to prepare for eternity as citizens of God’s very diverse universe.—B.J.R.