

“Have you ever played bocce ball?”

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“Columbus Day”

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Throw your brickbats. Blacklist me. Shun me. Scorn me. Call me insensitive, unenlightened. Do thy worst. For today I write to appreciate Christopher Columbus. He sailed the ocean blue in 1492 with his caravels to establish trading posts. The second voyage did establish imperial garrisons that imposed forced labor to serve as ports of commerce. Wrong by today’s standards. We today tidy up conquest. Nor did Columbus plan to infect the locals with diseases Europeans long before had died from and developed immunities against. It’s not as if he knew what germs were. What Columbus wanted to achieve was to chart faster trade routes to Japan, India, and China, known destinations. He carried a letter of introduction to the Grand Khan along with a diplomat who spoke Arabic. He wanted to cut deals. Marco Polo already had mapped the way to the Far East across deserts and mountains. Those land routes took too long. Vasco da Gama showed how the Portuguese could pilot along West Africa’s shoreline until the tip and then head northeast toward those Asian ports of commerce. That course also was long and arduous.

Columbus imagined that if he sailed from southern Spain to the Canaries, he could pick up equatorial westerly winds and sail directly to Japan in a few weeks. He figured all he had to sail was 2,400 nautical miles across open sea. He could sail across open sea because the latest in technology – portable clocks, lodestones, simple quadrants -- allowed ships to sail open sea rather than hug coastlines. Clever Christopher persuaded his financial backers by relying on Biblical scholarship that declared, according to the apocryphal work of Esdras, the earth was six parts land and one part water. Columbus reduced Ptolemy’s mathematics by 10% which estimated the earth at 18,000 miles round. Off by 31%. This could explain why Columbus and crew became puzzled when the trip wasn’t turning out the way they had expected. Columbus also later tried to explain some inconsistencies in coastlines by arguing that obviously the earth wasn’t a globe but pear shaped.

To his death, Columbus believed he had reached various shorelines off mainland China so Spain could speed up commerce with China, Japan, India. India? Yes, hence the name Indians, hence the West Indies. His goal was to discover how to sail the trade winds and return home. Columbus’ problem was that Europe didn’t know about the Pacific Ocean. Europe eventually realized they’d been “surprised by a new continent.” It took another fellow named Amerigo Vespucci ten years after Columbus’ first voyage to explore, return, and report what Amerigo deduced was “an unexpected part of the earth.” It took the casual suggestion of a mapmaker and the power of the printing press to christen these new lands after Amerigo, a naming the mapmaker later regretted.

In an Honduran school room I studied a map thumbtacked on the wall. The map was titled, “America.” It depicted all of America, from Hudson Bay to Tierra de Fuego. A parishioner from Paraguay enjoyed reminding us Norte Americanos: “Hey, I’m an American too.”

We forbear condemning Columbus and his colossal blunder. Let us be charitable, even if his succeeding kind were not. Should we vilify, condemn him for the deprivations caused by those who came next? Columbus died penniless, still convinced he found faster routes. China, he believed, was an island away.

Columbus dismissed convention and headed out into open seas and possibilities, resulting in unimagined us. So I dream of Columbus, joining the chorus from a song sung by Mary Black: "To set out and travel, Maps and charts, To voyage into the unknown, dreaming of lands unknown... Things can get twisted and crazy and crowded, You can't even feel right, So you dream of Columbus, Ever time the panic starts, You,, dream of Columbus, With your maps and your beautiful charts, You dream of Columbus, With an ache in your travelling heart."

Have you ever played bocce ball? You toss out the palino and then you figure out how to get to it

Okay, historically the song is inaccurate. The hoped for lands were known. The way, however, was not. That's the point. That's why we can dream of Columbus and raise a cup of gratitude. He could have quit. He could have gone along with the approved and safe, the usual and expected. He didn't. He ached. He looked to the horizon uncertain of what those seas would bring, hoisted anchor, raised sail, and headed toward something new.