

The Messenger

Volume 2012

Issue 1 *The Messenger, Spring 2012*

Article 3

Spring 2012

Pangaea

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Recommended Citation

Bruecker, Erick (2012) "Pangaea," *The Messenger*: Vol. 2012: Iss. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/messenger/vol2012/iss1/3>

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PANGAEA *By Erick Bruecker*

They (geologists, and the like) say that the earth wasn't always arranged the way it is now. They say that at one point, continents weren't separated by large bodies of water, but that land started as one big chunk of not-water somewhere in the middle of the water. Saudi Arabia was a part of Africa, which in turn was a part of the Americas, and so on.

Ms. Stern (who, in spite of her name, had the friendly, if passionless, overconfidence that comes with having just finished a third-rate degree in better economic times and would go on, if I'm recalling correctly, to contract either Lyme disease or pregnancy) called this chunk Pangaea. Progressing through my 7-year old brain and being interpreted by my speech-impaired mouth, it came out as something slightly different: panthea. It broke apart because of natural underground tuttunic plateth that have been consistently shifting since the earth was formed. Modern science (which I had just discovered) was, and remains, fairly certain of something like this. It explained earthquakes.

It was getting dark when my mom (who, in spite of any opinions that may be formed based on her actions here, is arguably a saint) came home and saw me, in the dining room with the lights off, gluing cut-out continent shapes onto blue construction paper in the positions in which they must have been before a few giant earthquakes (or thousands of very small earthquakes) settled them into their now familiar places. Being of the school of thought that parents must take an active interest in their children - especially what their children are doing in darkened rooms - she asked me what I was doing. I explained, as well as I could, about panthea and tuttunic plateth and that I was making a map of what the world used to look like. It took her a minute to realize that I was talking about homework, and she pointed out that Africa doesn't touch North America.

"See, they're separated by an ocean," she said.

They fit together, I explained. Before they were separated by oceans, they fit together and there used to be just one chunk of land. She told me I had to take my schoolwork more seriously, tried to point out where the continents actually belonged, but was dismayed to find that I had already glued all of the pieces onto the construction paper.

“Well, you can do this for fun, and I’ll print off more of these and get you some more construction paper, and you can do it right for your teacher.”

“Thith ith wight,” I said. “Thith ith how it wath.”

That was when she began to suspect that I may have been stupid. She called Amy W___’s mother, Mrs. W___, who confirmed that, yes, continents were often separated by oceans. Mrs. W___ wasn’t sure what to do about me. She suggested that children go through phases where they make up random things which they insist must be true. It certainly, Mrs. W___ assured my mom, wasn’t because [my dad had left].

Mom tried to reason with me one more time: “Amy isn’t doing it this way, so why are you?”

By this point, I was watching The Simpsons (at which she glared with forced disapproval) and could only be bothered to say, “Amy’th wong.”

She told me that I had to take school seriously. This wasn’t a joke. She wanted to know if something was wrong with me -- I had never acted like this before. Nothing was wrong with me. I was right, and if anyone disagreed with me then they were wrong. Of course, I couldn’t explain that then. Hell, I didn’t even know what it meant. In frustration, I went to bed.

When I got home from school the next day, Mom apologized. She had met with my teacher, apologized for my ignorance about the location of the continents, and promised that, if given another chance, she would make sure I did it right. I wasn’t a bad kid, I just had some problems because [my dad had left]. She would take me to a psychiatrist, make sure I flew straight. My mom assured Ms. Stern that I didn’t need to be put in any special classes. Ms. Stern pulled out the stack of continents glued to blue construction paper and handed them to my mom.

“Take a look at these,” she said. Every one of them had the continents separated. “Erick is the only one who did it right.” She explained to my mom that not only had I done nothing wrong but I was excelling. Her only fear was that I would get bored.

After her apology, in the long-term, my mom insisted that I either finish high school or get a job, and that I seriously consider college. Aside from these two major caveats, she settled into a largely ceremonial advisory role in my academic career. When I was struggling with math in middle school, she didn’t even ask what I was studying before suggesting that I get a tutor.

As for Pangaea, my mom accepted the idea without ever really warming to it. In the end we agreed that, personal opinions aside, it did exist once, and now it was gone.